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In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

Morocco...fans of Wydad Casablanca welcome their team out onto the pitch ahead of their Club World Cup match against Al Hilal

Netherlands...Ajax midfielder Mohammed Kudus pays tribute to Ghana team-mate Christian Atsu, who died as a result of the earthquake in Turkey

England...Millie Bright, Keira Walsh and Rachel Daly celebrate after the Lionesses' 6-1 win over Belgium to retain the Arnold Clark Cup

England...Liverpool supporters hold up banners in reaction to the inquiry into last season's Champions League final in Paris

England...Manchester United lift the Carabao Cup, their first trophy under the tenure of manager Erik ten Hag

Netherlands...Sevilla keeper Marko Dmitrovic holds down a pitch invader who attempted to attack him during the Europa League tie against PSV

Italy...Tottenham and Milan observe a minute's silence for the victims of the earthquake that devastated Turkey and Syria (more on page 20)

Brazil...Independiente del Valle lift the CONMEBOL Recopa, South America's Super Cup, after beating Flamengo 5-4 on penalties (more on page 32)

Saudi Arabia... Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates after hitting four goals for Al Nassr against Al Wehda

Colombia...Brazil celebrate winning the South American Under-20 Championship in Bogota (more on page 36)

United States...Canada players wear T-shirts in protest against Canada Soccer following a dispute with their national association

Morocco...Karim Benzema lifts the Club World Cup after Real Madrid win the trophy for the fifth time (more on page 76)

Japan...Masaaki Koido, a professor at the University of Tsukuba, holds up a jersey of his former student Kaoru Mitoma (more on page 38)

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

Commentators occupy a unique space in the hearts, minds and memories of football fans. Often, it is only when they pass away – as John Motson did in February, at the age of 77 – that we realise the extent to which they have provided the soundtrack to dozens of football memories going back decades.

When the news of Motson's death was announced, social media was awash with clips of some of the most famous moments from the last 50 years – all described by the commentator's iconic voice.

"The Crazy Gang have beaten the Culture Club!" he erupted after Wimbledon defeated Liverpool in the 1988 FA Cup final. "Oh this is getting better and better and better!" he exclaimed during England's 5-1 win over Germany in 2001, one of his own favourite lines.

On *Match of the Day*, in cup finals and at major tournaments, Motson was the voice of football to multiple generations of football fans across his long career.

> Motson was the voice of football to multiple generations of football fans across his long career

Sadly, his death was one of many tragedies to hit football over the past month. Ghana international Christian Atsu was among the victims of the devastating earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria, with John Duerden reporting on football's response to the tragedy. Elsewhere, Mark Gleeson looks back on a disaster ahead of its 30-year anniversary: the plane crash that wiped out 18 members of Zambia's national team.

There is, though, plenty to look forward to in this issue as well, with March's international fixtures ushering in new eras for a number of countries and their new managers, the new Copa Libertadores campaign throwing up some potentially fascinating stories, and England facing Brazil at Wembley in the women's Finalissima. We've got it all covered, and more.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

Change needed ...the decline of Bury FC was one of the catalysts for change

ENGLAND

Change afoot for English game

The wheels have been set in motion for an independent regulator to oversee English football.

As a result of recommendations made by last year's fan-led review, the British government have now outlined plans for a new regulator to address and oversee a number of issues in the game. "The English game remains one of the UK's greatest cultural exports," said a government statement announcing the proposed legislation. "That is why the government is today taking the necessary and targeted steps to ensure that continues for generations."

The regulators will address issues at all levels of the game, from ensuring that there is no repeat of the fates suffered by Bury and Macclesfield – historic clubs that have gone out of business due to mismanagement – to preventing clubs from joining competitions like the European Super League. Also among its priorities will be a renewed and more stringent owners' and directors' test, greater protection for clubs' cultural heritage such as their name, badge and colours, and ensuring a fair distribution of wealth through the football pyramid.

The announcement was welcomed by the FA, the Football League, the Football Supporters' Association and the Professional Footballers' Association, as well as both major political parties. The Premier League, however, was more cautious, warning: "It is vital regulation does not damage the game or its ability to attract investment and grow interest."

"The 2030 World Cup is not just another World Cup, it deserves a celebration with recognition for 100 years"

CONMEBOL president Alejandro Dominguez formally announces the combined bid from Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile to host the 2030 World Cup

FIFA

Messi named FIFA's Best

The Best... Lionel Messi

Lionel Messi collected his second Best FIFA Men's Player award, matching the joint-records of Cristiano Ronaldo and Robert Lewandowski since the award was established in 2016. Last August, the Argentina forward was overlooked entirely for the 2022 Ballon d'Or award, yet his World Cup exploits saw him catapulted to first place in the votes for this honour.

Elsewhere, Alexia Putellas completed a clean sweep of Ballon d'Or Feminin and Best FIFA Women's awards for the second year in a row, while the Puskas Award for goal of the year went to Marcin Oleksy and his remarkable bicycle kick for Polish amputee side Warta Poznan.

WINNERS

The Best Men's Player
Lionel Messi *(Paris Saint-Germain, Argentina)*
The Best Women's Player
Alexia Putellas *(Barcelona, Spain)*
The Best Men's Goalkeeper
Emiliano Martinez *(Aston Villa, Argentina)*
The Best Women's Goalkeeper
Mary Earps *(Manchester United, England)*
The Best Men's Coach
Lionel Scaloni *(Argentina)*
The Best Women's Coach
Sarina Wiegman *(England)*
The Best Puskas Award
Marcin Oleksy *(Warta Poznan)*

Men's FIFPRO XI

Thibaut Courtois *(Real Madrid, Belgium)*
Achraf Hakimi *(Paris Saint-Germain, Morocco)*
Virgil van Dijk *(Liverpool, Netherlands)*
Joao Cancelo *(Man. City/Bayern Munich, Portugal)*
Casemiro *(Real Madrid/Man. United, Brazil)*
Kevin De Bruyne *(Man. City, Belgium)*
Luka Modric *(Real Madrid, Croatia)*
Lionel Messi *(Paris Saint-Germain, Argentina)*
Karim Benzema *(Real Madrid, France)*
Erling Haaland *(B. Dortmund/Man. City, Norway)*
Kylian Mbappe *(Paris Saint-Germain, France)*

Women's FIFPRO XI

Christiane Endler *(Lyon, Chile)*
Lucy Bronze *(Man. City/Barcelona, England)*
Mapi Leon *(Barcelona, Spain)*
Leah Williamson *(Arsenal, England)*
Wendie Renard *(Lyon, France)*
Lena Oberdorf *(Wolfsburg, Germany)*
Keira Walsh *(Man. City/Barcelona, England)*
Alexia Putellas *(Barcelona, Spain)*
Beth Mead *(Arsenal, England)*
Sam Kerr *(Chelsea, Australia)*
Alex Morgan *(Orlando Pride/San Diego Wave, USA)*

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

42
European goals scored for Liverpool by Mohamed Salah after he found the net in the Champions League against Real Madrid, a new club record.

41
Years, four months and 23 days, the age at which Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic became Milan's oldest player of all time, overtaking Alessandro Costacurta's record.

181
Manchester United clean sheets kept by goalkeeper David de Gea after the Carabao Cup final victory over Newcastle United, overtaking Peter Schmeichel's club record.

24
Number of games it took for Cremonese to finally win their first Serie A match of the season after a shock 2-1 victory over Jose Mourinho's Roma.

8
Red cards shown during the Campeonato Paranaense state clash between title rivals Athletico Paranaense and Coritiba after a stoppage-time brawl.

3
Spakenburg are only the third Dutch amateur club to reach the KNVB Cup semi-finals during the professional era after a shock 4-1 thrashing of top-flight FC Utrecht.

298
Number of games Kylian Mbappe needed to match Edinson Cavani's all-time scoring record of 200 goals for Paris Saint-Germain.

PSG legend... Kylian Mbappe

1
Almeria's 1-0 win over Barcelona at the end of February was their first-ever victory against the Catalan giants.

16
Position that Gareth Bale finished among amateurs in the Pebble Beach Pro-Am golf tournament in California, the Wales legend's first competition as a golfer.

Teeing off...Bale during the Pebble Beach Pro-Am tournament in California

6
Samba Gold awards, given to Brazil's Player of the Year, won by Neymar – more than any other player since the award started in 2008.

7,700
Proposed expansion to Manchester City's Etihad Stadium, which would see the Premier League club's attendance rise from 53,400 to over 60,000.

700
Club goals scored by Lionel Messi during his career after notching for Paris Saint-Germain against Marseille in *Le Classique*.

8
Goals scored by Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo in the Saudi Pro League in February, earning him the Player of the Month award. It also saw the Portugal legend pass 500 career league goals in the progress.

84
Number of years since Grimsby Town's last FA Cup quarter-final appearance, after the League Two outfit won away at Premier League strugglers Southampton in the fifth round.

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

Power games: Manchester United valuation highlights the chasm between the Premier League and Europe

Up for sale...United's American owners are ready to sell

That was the week that was. On the Monday Premier League lawyers hit Manchester City with 100-plus alleged breaches of financial regulations; next day neighbours United were subject to speculation of a Qatari buyout; one day more and the European Super League spectre was revived; finally, on the Saturday, Real Madrid reclaimed the official world club crown by defeating Al Hilal in Morocco.

Power games on and off the pitch and following the money. All in a dateline sequence the major themes of elite club football: financial imbalance, multinational ownership, super league mischief and FIFA's bid to hijack club cash.

This has left European federation UEFA – depending on your point of view – either trying to preserve administrative and competitive sanity, or attempting, Canute-like, to hold back an irresistible surge of money-driven change.

Of course, any European Super League and FIFA's Club World Cup are distant cousins. The world federation was notably slower off the mark to condemn the ESL in its original shape two years ago; almost as if it wished it had thought of the idea first. Even FIFA president Gianni Infantino has found he must tread delicately in wanting to both run with the fox and hunt with the hounds.

The problem for the A22 company supposedly running the Super League is that the English Premier League is increasingly far out of reach of the rest. Just fancy: in brand terms, Spain, Germany, Italy and France are now considered second-class citizens. Gianni Agnelli, Santiago Bernabeu and Gabriel Hanot must be spinning in their graves.

No denying the depth of the chasm opening up between England and the rest. Consider the January transfer window and Chelsea setting a British record with the £106.8 million capture of Enzo Fernandez, Benfica's World Cup-winning Argentina midfielder. The deal took Chelsea's January expenditure beyond the combined totals of the Bundesliga, La Liga, Serie A and Ligue 1. By the way, it was also more than the total spent by Premier League clubs in each of the previous January windows, excluding 2018 (£430m).

While the fans agonised over escalating energy prices and the cost-of-living crisis, so England's clubs grew even more divorced from reality. La Liga president Javier Tebas once forecast that the bubble would burst. He is still waiting.

Consider Chelsea. The spending

splurge by Todd Boehly and his Clearlake Capital consortium since buying out Roman Abramovich last summer suggests their bankers considered the purchase as a bargain with plenty to spare for the transfer market.

This awareness is playing in the minds of speculators circling ever closer to Manchester United and Liverpool. No one now doubts the eagerness of the despised Glazer family to exit the executive suites at Old Trafford, while new money will certainly be welcome at Anfield after their disastrous season. John W. Henry, Liverpool's owner, insists the club is not for sale, but they are looking for new investors.

Make no mistake, Liverpool are nothing like as big a prize as Manchester United. The Anfield club are a magnificent footballing institution, but United are a world brand

The strategies of both can be interpreted as a ruthless business assessment that few major cash-generating opportunities exist.

All-important television deals at home and abroad, in the current economic climate, are stuck fast, and fan and political pressures forced English clubs to sign away their right of access to the original Super League. A confirmed 12 European outfits will contest the first expanded Club World Cup in 2025. The profits will be welcome but not revolutionary.

Make no mistake, Liverpool are nothing like as big a prize as Manchester United. The Anfield club are a magnificent footballing institution, but United are a world brand. While Fenway Sports Group (FSG) expect to value Liverpool at somewhere close to the London-weighted £4 billion that Boehly paid for Chelsea, United are on a different plane. Consider the suitors: billionaire businessman Sir Jim Ratcliffe, of INEOS fame, is one. Yet Ratcliffe could be blown out of the water by rival bids from the United States or Qatar.

Currently a state-perceived Qatari bid could not, under UEFA rules, run both United and Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League. But their lawyers should be able to circumvent that roadblock.

Indeed, whispers in France suggest that perhaps the Qatar-PSG link is not as tight now that Neymar and Lionel Messi are nearing their own personal final whistles, that Kylian Mbappe may still hanker after that move to Madrid, and that PSG can never be a major, multi trophy-winning international force.

Any potential new owner – whether from the US, the UK or the Gulf – will know that, according to *Forbes*, United are worth £3.7bn, but that the Glazers want to see bidding racing north of £6bn.

UEFA sits at the end of the queue of interested parties. Its weakness is that it can only ever play a reactive role.

The original Financial Fair Play rules were concocted because of an increasing number of bankruptcies and transfer payment failures. Rules were rewritten because of challenges by the likes of Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain. Then came the pandemic, which rendered the old rules null and void so UEFA has written a new set. It opposes multi-club ownership but the City Football Group is already out of sight, with 11 clubs all around the world including four in Europe.

UEFA invests heavily in portraying itself as the great defender of football. But, as demonstrated by its own damning report into last year's Champions League final chaos, UEFA's first line of defence is focused on itself. Heads should roll over the Stade de France scandal but do not expect Aleksander Ceferin to set an example: he is up for election unopposed later this spring.

Such stability suits the major clubs. They know they can force UEFA to keep refashioning the Champions League and its cash distribution system. This is also why, one day, some sort of compromise will be sorted for super rebels Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus. After all, acquisitive and aggressive new owners at Manchester United and anyone else may have no interest in toeing the UEFA line.

That is not their strategy in return for a multi-million investment in football's future.

Seeking new investment...but Liverpool owner John W. Henry insists the club is not for sale

BOOKS THIS MONTH

INSIDE DIEGO
By Fernando Signorini, with Luciano Wernicke and Fernando Molina (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Inside Diego is an intimate portrait of Diego Maradona from the person in football who knew him best – his personal trainer Fernando Signorini. Signorini offers a unique perspective on the troubled legend, giving us the lowdown not only on Diego's evolution as an athlete but on Diego the human being, witnessing a dizzying array of highs and lows.

SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT
By Hannah Grainger Clemson (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

So Much More Than That takes you on a fascinating family journey of football through the industrial heartlands in and around Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester to explore how migration, industry and war influenced the early structure and culture of English and Scottish football. Often serious, sometimes funny, it reveals how ordinary people experienced life and the rise of the beautiful game in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Unflashy Kane is a very British hero

Harry Kane had already begun to make his mark when he lined up for Tottenham against Chelsea on New Year's Day 2015. There'd been some promising appearances in the Europa League – including the game against Asteras Tripoli in which he scored a hat-trick and ended up going in goal for the final minutes, letting in a goal after fumbling a free-kick. He had scored a last-minute winner against Aston Villa that Mauricio Pochettino said had saved his job, and then had scored in three consecutive 2-1 wins through December. But it was in that big clash, against the then-Premier League leaders Chelsea, on the first day of 2015 that really underlined what a talent he was.

I remember the conversation I had with another journalist before kick-off. Both of us were a little baffled by Kane; we couldn't work out why he was good. He wasn't especially tall, he wasn't especially quick, he didn't dribble past people or seem to have any profound technical skill, and he wasn't explosive in the manner of an Alan Shearer. There was a slight awkwardness to him; he didn't have the lithe grace of many forwards. Was his scoring streak just a flash in the pan? Against Chelsea, Kane scored twice and won a penalty in a 5-3 win. I'm not sure I had much greater insight into what made Kane exceptional, but I knew that he was.

His goalscoring record since has been astounding. Against Manchester City in February, Kane scored his 200th Premier League goal. It was also his 267th goal for Tottenham, taking him past Jimmy Greaves as the club's all-time leading scorer. Nobody can really doubt now that Kane is one of the all-time greats; it is surely only a matter of time before he surpasses Wayne Rooney as England's all-time leading scorer as well – with Euro 2024 qualifiers impending – and he has already won a Golden Boot at a World Cup, something achieved by only one other England player.

Record breaker... Kane nets his record-breaking 267th Tottenham goal

> In his own unflashy way he is an exceptional finisher, a player with a great capacity to read the game who is also blessed with perhaps the most vital skill of all, the ability to select the lowest difficulty option in any situation

Yet there is still a sense that he isn't entirely taken seriously, that this is just a nine-year glitch that could at some point be reset. In part it is that slight lack of elegance or fluency. As he turns, you can almost hear the clanking of his hips. And while it is to his credit that he seems remarkably grounded, the fact that he still plays for Tottenham, that he married his childhood sweetheart and that he is not flashy perhaps means that he does not capture the attention as more charismatic figures do.

That initial impression remains to an extent true. Kane is not a player with one great attribute. But he is a player with a remarkable range of attributes. He's scored 37 goals with his head

Tottenham legend... Spurs fans pay tribute to their record scorer

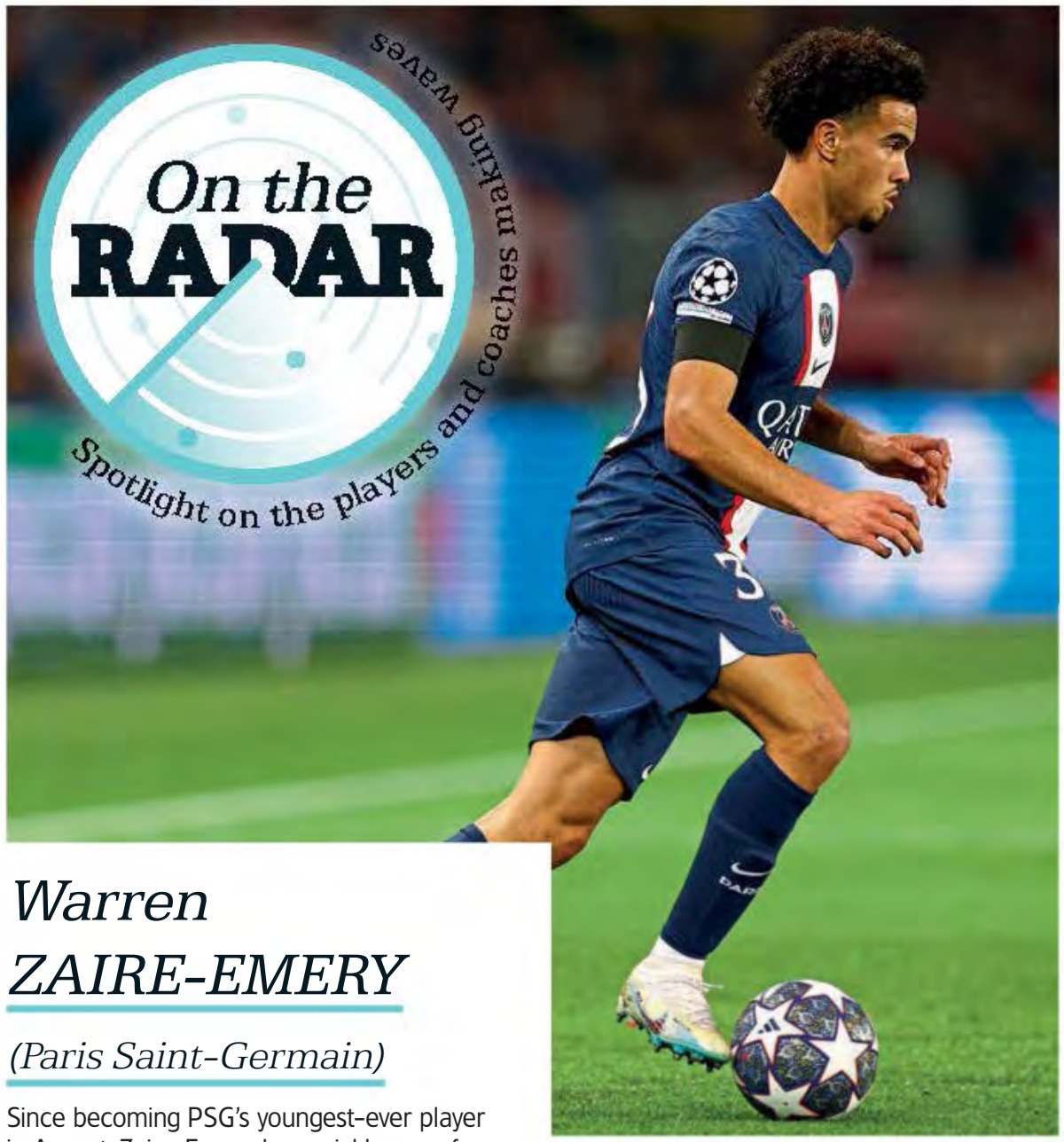
and 40 with his weaker left foot. He's netted 30 penalties and one direct free-kick. He can score from long range or closer in from crosses. He is exceptionally gifted at getting shots away, averaging 3.6 per game this season, higher than anybody with the exception of Aleksandar Mitrovic and Darwin Nunez, but he has also played 1.7 key passes, joint 15th in the Premier League list. Only Bukayo Saka and Mohamed Salah come remotely close across the two disciplines combined.

That's why the occasional calls for Kane to stay in the box seem so misguided. He is a unique player, one of the leading goalscorers of all time, but a player who happens also to be a very fine creator. Perhaps he would score more if he hung around the box, but his team would probably score fewer – and if you're the third leading Premier League scorer of all time by the age of 29, goalscoring really isn't an issue.

Perhaps he doesn't quite have the quicksilver quality of Greaves – he is not so obviously easy on the eye – but his effectiveness is beyond doubt. And in his own unflashy way he is an exceptional finisher, a player with a great capacity to read the game who is also blessed with perhaps the most vital skill of all, the ability to select the lowest difficulty option in any situation. He does what he needs to do to get the job done and nothing more complex. That may mean that he is less spectacular than many of his peers, but he is more successful.

He is also admirably unflappable, which is one of the reasons he is so generally adept with penalties. And when he did miss a vital one, for England against France at the World Cup, there was no obvious adverse reaction. He simply returned to Spurs and started scoring goals again.

In that sense Kane is a very British type. He has the vague air of a minor RAF officer, somebody in a war film doomed to be shot down in heart-rending circumstances, but he also has the phlegmatic temperament of a Richard Hannay, a Harry Palmer or a Paddington Bear, the unprepossessing figure thrust by circumstance into the role of hero.



Warren ZAIRE-EMERY

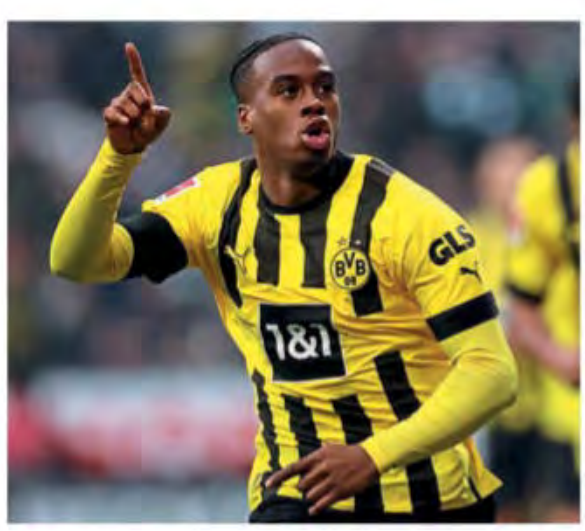
(Paris Saint-Germain)

Since becoming PSG's youngest-ever player in August, Zaire-Emery has quickly gone from exciting young prospect to genuine first-team candidate in the eyes of manager Christophe Galtier. In January, the young midfielder started for the first time, scored his first goal a month later to become the club's youngest-ever goalscorer as well, and then started in the crucial Champions League tie against Bayern Munich to break yet another record: the youngest player to start a knockout game in the competition's history. A thrilling future awaits a player who has only just turned 17.

Jamie BYNOE-GITTENS

(Borussia Dortmund)

The England youth international is becoming something of a super sub for the German title-chasers, with his first three Bundesliga goals all coming off the bench.



Alex SCOTT

(Bristol City)

A team-mate of Bynoe-Gittens in England Under-19s' European Championship success last summer, the £25 million-rated midfielder is attracting interest from all over Europe.

Folarin BALOGUN

(Reims)

The 21-year-old Arsenal loanee is currently on track to become the first-ever Englishman to win Ligue 1's Golden Boot after a flurry of goals in 2023. His upturn in form has coincided with the appointment of 30-year-old manager **WILL STILL**, another Englishman thriving at the French club, who has steered Reims away from relegation trouble despite not possessing his UEFA pro coaching licence.

"I am homosexual and I no longer want to hide myself"

Czech Republic and Sparta Prague midfielder Jakub Jankto becomes the first current men's international footballer to publicly come out as gay

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Back in the dugout ...Neil Warnock

Homecoming... Ruben Baraja

EUROPE

Premier League sides Southampton and Leeds United both appointed new Spanish managers, with **RUBEN SELLES** taking the Saints job and ex-Watford boss **JAVI GRACIA** arriving at Elland Road.

In the Football League, **NEIL WARNOCK** came out of retirement to take charge of Huddersfield Town. Elsewhere, **GARETH AINSWORTH** left Wycombe Wanderers to take over at QPR, with **MATT BLOOMFIELD** replacing him at Adams Park.

In Scotland, **STUART KETTLEWELL** was named Motherwell manager after the sacking of Steven Hammell, and **JIM GOODWIN** replaced Liam Fox at Dundee United.

In France, Montpellier appointed **MICHEL DER ZAKARIAN** to replace Romain Pitau as coach, and Strasbourg hired **FREDERIC ANTONETTI** after the departure of Mathieu Le Scornet.

Hoffenheim appointed ex-Stuttgart coach **PELLEGRINO MATARAZZO** to replace Andre Breitenreiter.

Portuguese boss **PAULO SOUSA** took charge of Salernitana having been sacked by Flamengo last summer. Elsewhere in Serie A, Spezia hired **LEONARDO SEMPLICI** after firing Luca Gotti.

Former Valencia midfielder **RUBEN BARAJA** returned to the club as coach.

Russia striker **ARTEM DZYUBA** joined Lokomotiv Moscow as a free agent after leaving Adana Demirspor in November, **ZAKARIA LABYAD** joined FC Utrecht after being released by Ajax last summer, and former Real Madrid, PSG and Stoke City forward **JESE** joined Serie A strugglers Sampdoria.

ASIA

After the World Cup departures of their managers, Qatar appointed **CARLOS QUEIROZ** and South Korea hired former Germany and USA boss **JURGEN KLINSMANN**. Elsewhere, Vietnam hired Frenchman **PHILIPPE TROUSSIER**, China appointed Serbian coach **ALEKSANDAR JANKOVIC**, and experienced Argentine coach **HECTOR CUPER** took charge of Syria.

FC Seoul signed South Korea striker **HWANG UI-JO** on loan from Nottingham Forest until the summer.

Qatari side Al Sadd signed Morocco striker **AYOUB EL KAABI** from Hatayspor.

AFRICA

After working as a technical advisor during the World Cup, **CHRIS HUGHTON** was appointed as Otto Addo's successor as Ghana's permanent head coach.

African champions Wydad Casablanca appointed former coach **JUAN CARLOS GARRIDO** as boss after ending Mehdi Nefti's brief tenure.

CONCACAF

Argentine manager **DIEGO COCCA** took charge of the Mexico national team, just weeks after being appointed as coach of LigaMX giants Tigres UANL.

Atlanta United signed Greece striker **GIORGOS GIAKOUMAKIS** from Celtic, New York Red Bulls recruited one-cap Belgium striker **DANTE VANZEIR** from Royale Union Saint-Gilloise, FC Cincinnati loaned **YERSON MOSQUERA** from Wolverhampton Wanderers, and LAFC signed **TIMOTHY TILLMAN** (the older brother of Rangers midfielder Malik) from Greuther Furth.

SOUTH AMERICA

Brazil named **RAMON MENEZES**, the coach of their Under-20 side, as interim manager of the senior national team for March's friendly with Morocco.

After being released by Greek giants Olympiakos, Brazilian left-back **MARCELO** re-joined his first club Fluminense. The former Real Madrid man only spent five months in Greece.

Santos signed Colombia winger **DANIEL RUIZ RIVERA** on loan from Millonarios, and **VITINHO** joined Red Bull Bragantino on loan from Dynamo Kyiv after spending the first half of the season with Athletico Paranaense.

LATE TRANSFER WINDOWS ROUND-UP

A number of European leagues' winter transfer windows remained open until mid-February

Nicolo Zaniolo	*Roma (Ita) to Galatasaray (Tur)*	€16m
Jayden Nelson	*Toronto FC (Can) to Rosenborg (Nor)*	€1m
Adnan Januzaj	*Sevilla (Spa) to Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur)*	€550k
Kevin Mbabu	*Fulham (Eng) to Servette (Sui)*	Loan
Ferro	*Benfica (Por) to Hajduk Split (Cro)*	Loan
Lazar Markovic	*Gaziantep (Tur) to Trabzonspor (Tur)*	Loan
Marko Lazetic	*Milan (Ita) to SCR Altach (Aut)*	Loan
Alexandru Maxim	*Gaziantep (Tur) to Besiktas (Tur)*	Loan
Alejandro Pozuelo	*Inter Miami (USA) to Konyaspor (Tur)*	Free

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Spain legend... Sergio Ramos

EUROPE

Spain's World Cup-winning defender **SERGIO RAMOS** announced his retirement from the national team after winning a record 180 caps for *La Roja*. Also quitting international duty were Wales midfielder **JOE ALLEN** and Croatian defender **DEJAN LOVREN**.

Swiss outfit Basel sacked legendary striker **ALEXANDER FREI** as manager after a disappointing season.

Former Barcelona youngsters **REY MANAJ** and **MOUSSA WAGUE** both became free agents after being released by Watford and HNK Gorica of Croatia respectively.

OCEANIA

New Zealand's national team are on the search for a new manager after the departure of **DARREN HAY**. Technical director Darren Bazeley has taken caretaker charge.

"John Motson was the voice of a footballing generation – steering us through the twists and turns of FA Cup runs, the highs and lows of World Cups and, of course, Saturday nights on *Match of the Day*"

BBC director-general Tim Davie

OBITUARIES

AMANCIO (1939-2023)
Real Madrid snapped up Amancio from Deportivo La Coruna after a sensational 1961-62 season in which the winger hit 25 goals in 26 second-division matches. He would remain at Madrid for the rest of his career, and indeed most of his life, scoring 154 goals in 469 games across 14 years before coaching the youth teams, reserve team and, for the 1984-85 season, the first team.

In his first season at the club he lifted the first of nine La Liga titles, and in his second helped the team reach the European Cup final. Although Real lost to Internazionale, he made up for it by winning the European Championship with Spain weeks later, scoring the extra-time winner in the semi-final against Hungary.

Nicknamed *El Brujo* (The Wizard), he remained a star throughout the 1960s, scoring five goals en route to the 1966 European Cup, including one in the final, and winning back-to-back Pichichi awards in 1969 and 1970. In 1968 he scored a seven-minute hat-trick v Sparta Prague – the fastest treble in Madrid's history.

Allan McGRAW (1939-2023)
The all-time record scorer for Greenock Morton, netting 117 league goals, before returning to manage the club, winning the Scottish First Division in 1986-87 and the Second Division in 1994-95.

Kevin BIRD (1952-2023)
A Mansfield Town legend, the defender hit 63 goals in 463 games and helped the club win both the Fourth and Third Division titles in the mid-1970s.

Peter ALLEN (1946-2023)
The record appearance holder of Leyton Orient, playing 490 games for the club.

Petar ZHEKOV (1944-2023)
An icon of Bulgarian football, Zhekov won a silver medal for his country at the 1968 Olympic Games and scored 144 goals in just 167 league games for CSKA Sofia. In 1969 he won the European Golden Shoe with 36 goals.

Friedel LUTZ (1939-2023)
Ex-West Germany and Eintracht Frankfurt full-back. Played in the 7-3 defeat to Real Madrid in the 1960 European Cup final.

Ron GORDON (1954-2023)
The owner of Scottish side Hibernian.

***Heroe Madridista*...a tribute to Amancio at the Bernabeu**

Dickie DAVIES (1928-2023)
A giant of sports broadcasting, and long-serving presenter of ITV's World of Sport.

Christian ATSU (1992-2023)
The Ghana and Hatayspor winger was tragically killed in the earthquake that devastated Turkey and Syria. Other football victims of the disaster included:
- **Nader JOUKHADAR**, ex-Syrian international and former manager of Salam Zgharta (1977-2023).
- **Taner SAVUT**, Hatayspor's sporting director (1974-2023).
- **Ahmet Eyup TURKASLAN**, Yeni Malatyaspor goalkeeper (1994-2023).

Tragic...Christian Atsu

Billy THOMSON (1958-2023)
The ex-Scotland keeper enjoyed a long career in his home country, most notably starring in the Dundee United side that reached the UEFA Cup final in 1987.

Miroslav BLAZEVIC (1935-2023)
Managed over 20 club and international teams in a coaching career that lasted nearly 50 years. His standout achievement remains guiding Croatia to third place at France '98, their first-ever World Cup.

Mastermind...Blazevic

Marcos ALONSO (1959-2023)
Part of a footballing dynasty, Alonso's father Marquitos played for Real Madrid in the 1950s, while his son and namesake now plays for Barcelona. Alonso senior played for Atletico Madrid and Barca during the 1980s before going on to manage a number of Spanish clubs.

Pelayo NOVO (1990-2023)
A former midfielder with the likes of Oviedo, Elche, CFR Cluj and Albacete, Novo's career was ended when he suffered permanent paralysis after falling from a hotel in 2018. He went on to enjoy some success as a wheelchair tennis player.

Goal king...Fontaine

John MOTSON (1945-2023)
For 50 years, Motson was one of the definitive voices of football in the UK. After starting on *Match of the Day* in 1971, "Motty" went on to cover 20 major tournaments, 29 FA Cup finals, over 200 England matches and almost 2,500 televised games in total. The first of which was in the 1972 FA Cup, when non-league Hereford stunned First Division Newcastle thanks to Ronnie Radford's 30-yard thunderbolt. For the first time of many, Motson's voice accompanied an iconic footballing moment. He hung up his microphone in 2018, with Crystal Palace v West Bromwich Albion his last-ever game for *Match of the Day*.

Just FONTAINE (1933-2023)
No one has ever come near threatening the record of Just Fontaine's 13 goals at the 1958 World Cup in Sweden.

In the summer of 1956 Fontaine was bought by Reims, who had not only just lost to Real Madrid in the inaugural European Cup final, but also had a gap to fill in attack after selling playmaker Raymond Kopa to the Spanish giants.

Fontaine was a very different sort of player; not a schemer but a brave and resourceful centre-forward, and his goals helped Reims regain the French league title in 1958.

He was an obvious choice for France's squad at that summer's World Cup, and hit a hat-trick in *Les Bleus'* opening 7-3 defeat of Paraguay, followed by two goals in a 3-2 defeat to Yugoslavia, then scored again in the 2-1 win over Scotland.

In the knockout rounds the goals kept flowing. He netted twice in a 4-0 defeat of Northern Ireland in the quarters and one in the subsequent 5-2 loss to Brazil.

At that point Fontaine totalled nine goals, and he raced into double figures by scoring four times in the 6-3 win over West Germany in the third place play-off.

Reims lost again to Madrid in the 1959 European Cup final, after which Kopa returned to play alongside Fontaine at Reims. Fontaine credited Kopa's creativity for the majority of his World Cup goals, yet injuries prevented them from reviving their prolific partnership. Kopa never fully recovered from a knee injury suffered in the 1959 final, and Fontaine was forced to retire in 1962 after a double leg fracture. He hit 30 goals in 21 internationals and was the French league's top scorer twice.

Keir Radnedge

eyewitness

John Duerden reports

TURKEY & SYRIA

Football in a disaster zone

It is going to take years for southern and central Turkey and parts of northern and western Syria to recover from the devastating earthquake that hit in the early hours of the morning on February 6. Football is obviously nowhere near a priority amid such disaster, but the sport will go on, sooner or later, and in the meantime just needs to do all it can to help.

Tens of thousands have died in the affected regions and it was no surprise that a number of teams based there decided that they couldn't even begin to think about playing football.

TURKEY

Clubs in southern Turkey – Hatayspor and Gaziantep, 14th and 10th in the country's top flight – have withdrawn from the Turkish Super Lig for the rest of the season, but they will not be relegated and it is understood that they will receive the full allocation of broadcasting revenue from the league.

Every bit of it will be needed. Hatayspor are based in Antakya, the capital of Hatay Province, which has suffered major damage. While the stadium is one of the few major buildings still intact, it has become a massive "tent village" housing thousands of suddenly homeless people. It also acts as an information centre to help them find out what has happened to loved ones.

Gaziantep released an official statement that summed up the situation. "After such a disaster, we cannot even talk about football," the club wrote on their official website. "It does not seem possible for our club to continue its sporting activities under all these difficult conditions. With a decision taken by our Board of Directors, Gaziantep FK has decided to withdraw from the Super Lig and Ziraat Turkish Cup competitions for the 2022–2023 season." Players from the clubs that had decided to withdraw were starting to be loaned elsewhere for the rest of the season and by the end of February, a dozen had left Gaziantep.

In the second tier, Adanaspor and Yeni Malatyaspor – who lost goalkeeper Ahmet Eyup Turkaslan in the earthquake – also decided to sit out the rest of the season. While there were stories of close escapes and reports of five Hatayspor players being pulled safely from the rubble, others were not so lucky. The body of the club's sporting director, Taner Savut, was found more than two weeks after the earthquake in a place not far from where Christian Atsu was discovered, one of the most well-known players in the squad.

Before Newcastle United took on Liverpool in the Premier League on February 18, there was an emotional minute's applause in remembrance of Atsu who played for the club from 2016 to 2021. The Ghanaian winger arrived at Porto when he was just 17 and two years later joined Chelsea, before spending loan spells at Vitesse Arnhem, Everton, Bournemouth, Malaga and then Newcastle in 2016. With five Championship goals and plenty of examples of exciting wing play, he earned a permanent deal on Tyneside, becoming a regular in the club's return to the Premier League. He moved on to Saudi Arabia when his contract ended at the end of the 2020–21 season, but his time with Al Raed was a short one and in September 2022 he joined Hatayspor.

The former Ghana international, who played all the group games for his country at the 2014 World Cup, was Player of the Tournament at the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations as he played a big part in the Black Stars reaching the final and also made the Team of the Tournament two years later. Just hours before the earthquake,

Disaster zone...a young family play football in front of a damaged mosque in Elbistan, Turkey

the 31-year-old had scored his first goal in Turkish football.

"He had a [plane] ticket to go but, because he scored, he changed his mind about leaving," said Fatih Ilek, Hatayspor's administrative manager. "He was caught in an earthquake on his happiest day."

Instead, according to his agent Nana Sechere, Atsu went out to play poker with team-mates before returning to his ninth-floor apartment shortly before the earthquake hit. Initially, some reports claimed that he had been found and was recovering in hospital, but when these were contradicted by Sechere concerns began to grow. The sad news came through on February 18.

On the following day, his body was flown back to Accra where it was met by Ghana's vice-president Mahamudu Bawumia. "We prayed and prayed, but alas when he was found he was no more," Bawumia said. "We'll sorely miss him." Also present was Abdul-Hayye Yartey, owner of Cheetah FC where Atsu began his career, who helped him make the initial move to Portugal in 2011. "I think we need to remember Christian for his generosity, how humble he was and how determined he was," he said.

Tribute...Newcastle and Liverpool pay their respects to Christian Atsu

New Hatay Stadium... Hatayspor's ground has become home to thousands of displaced people

"It saddens my heart that his last flight back to Ghana was one that I have to come and receive his body. But I am very proud of him."

There is something to be proud of in how football in Turkey has come together. The federation and Super League is committed to building 1,000 homes in the worst-hit areas and there has been material and emotional support from other clubs and their fans.

There is also the example of 1999 to look to. The Izmit Earthquake was similarly devastating and resulted in almost 20,000 deaths. Yet the country nd football quickly bounced back with the sport having unprecedented international success. The following year, Galatasaray won the UEFA Cup and the national team reached the

quarter-finals of Euro 2000. Then, in a first World Cup appearance since 1954, they finished third in 2002 to put a big smile on the face of tens of millions of Turkish people.

SYRIA

Unity has not been a major theme for Syria in recent years where the situation before the earthquake was already dire for many of those who had chosen to stay in the country. The civil war that broke out in 2011 has been devastating and has resulted in the deaths of over half a million people and the displacement of around 12 million others, over half of Syria's original population.

There were similarities in how the local FA moved quickly to postpone games and put all football-related activities on the backburner. "The Syrian Arab Football Federation family prays for mercy for the victims of the earthquake and wishes recovery for the injured and safety of all citizens in all Syrian governorates," the federation said in a statement. The body operates the 12-team Syrian Premier League, which has also been paused. The centrally-based General Sports Federation said that not only were all sports postponed but all teams and officials would be placed at the disposal of those authorities that provide aid and assistance.

Parts of the country such as those in the north-western areas most affected by the earthquake are not under the control of the Syria government led by Bashar al-Assad, but the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), an opponent to the dictator's regime. There was no early statement from SIG but players, clubs and officials have been pitching in to help rescue people and also distribute aid to those affected.

The political situation makes everything more difficult and that includes football. SIG have criticised Al-Assad and accused him of politicising football in an attempt to make it a unifying force and also one that helps boost support for the regime. In 2015, national team coach Fajr Ibrahim, midfielder Osama Omari and a federation official appeared at a pre-match press conference in Singapore for a 2018 World Cup qualifier wearing T-shirts which displayed Al-Assad's image. "This is our president, we are proud because Mr Bashar is our president, so proud," Ibrahim told reporters, insisting that there had been no instructions from above and that he wanted to keep politics out of football.

The opposition administrations have blasted FIFA, the Asian Football Confederation and other international sporting organisations for not doing more to stop Syria from competing on the international stage despite the violence that has been unleashed from Damascus over the years.

Syria's national team have actually improved in recent years, though they have not played a World Cup qualifier at home since before the war. Despite that, the Qasioun Eagles managed to come close to making it to Russia (they were kicked off the road to Brazil after being found guilty of fielding an ineligible player) and did enough to earn an intercontinental play-off against Australia. The prize for the winner was a clash with Honduras for a place at the World Cup, but they lost 3-2 on aggregate. Had the first leg taken place in Syria and not in Malaysia then they may have gone all the way, but playing home games in third countries has been a fact of life over the past decade.

The earthquake means more hardship for Syria and their football scene and, while the game has functioned during war and will continue to do so again, it is hard to see it contributing to a sense of national unity, especially as it is seen by many as a tool of the ruling regime. Turkey have shown before that football can bounce back from a devastating earthquake to put a smile back on the face of the country and, if past experience is anything to go by, will be strong contenders at Euro 2024 and the next World Cup.

> "He had a [plane] ticket to go but, because he scored, he changed his mind about leaving. He was caught in an earthquake on his happiest day"
>
> **Fatih Ilek, Hatayspor's administrative manager, on Christian Atsu**

Repatriated...Christian Atsu's body is returned to his homeland Ghana

eye witness

Danny Lewis reports

CANADA

Forge FC set the standards in Canadian Premier League

In one of the most important periods in Canada's football history, with the CONCACAF nation ending their 36-year wait for World Cup qualification in Qatar and co-hosting duties to come in 2026, the Canadian Premier League (CPL) represents a major step forward by providing the country with a professional league.

Having faced down challenges such as COVID and the dissolution of FC Edmonton, the CPL has evolved and developed since its inception in 2019. Amid all of this, one thing has always remained the same as the league enters its fifth campaign: Forge FC's status as standard setters.

The format of the competition is an eight-team league, with the top four advancing to play-offs to compete for the North Star Shield trophy. Of the four seasons that have been played to date, Forge have been champions in three, and lost in the final of the other.

Head coach and technical director Bobby Smyrniotis has been at the heart of the club's progress. Taking inspiration from the likes of Ajax, the co-founder and former head coach of Sigma FC – a development academy that boasts Canadian internationals Tajon Buchanan, Cyle Larin and Ritchie Laryea among its alumni – was keen to give Forge a strong structure from the start by bringing in players he knew from Sigma.

Landmark moment ...Forge FC players huddle together ahead of their CONCACAF Champions League clash with Cruz Azul

Azteca...a general view of the historic stadium ahead of Cruz Azul v Forge FC last year

"It was a natural progression," he tells *World Soccer*. "To have some players who were playing at Sigma at a semi-professional level the year before, but also players who have graduated through the academy and were playing in MLS. To bring them back and build the backbone of the club off of these players with a shared idea, a shared vision, I think that allowed us to springboard forward quicker."

One player that proves the merits of that approach is Tristan Borges. In the CPL's inaugural season he won the Golden Boot, Player of the Year and Best U21 Canadian Player of the Year, and scored in the play-off final as Forge became the league's first-ever champions. That set the midfielder up for a move to Belgian side OH Leuven, making him one of several CPL players to be recruited abroad.

Forge FC head coach and technical director...Bobby Smyrniotis

The move to Belgium didn't work out for Borges, playing four matches in one season before returning to Forge. He provided an assist in last year's play-off final, and maintains that the CPL is a good league for players to develop in.

"If you deserve to be playing you'll get a good amount of minutes," he says of the Canadian top flight. "It was a good year that I had, that first year, which ended up making me have the opportunity to get that move to Europe.

"Having already had a lot of players take a couple of steps forward into MLS or to Europe, it just goes to show that it's going to keep happening."

Arguably the league's biggest triumph so far is former Cavalry FC centre-back Joel Waterman, who joined MLS club CF Montreal after impressing in the CPL's inaugural season and made it into John Herdman's World Cup squad in Qatar.

There have also been various other transfers to Europe. In January alone, Pacific's Marco Bustos joined Swedish side Varnamo, York United's Dominick Zator moved to Polish outfit Korona Kielce, and his team-mate Ronan Kratt was loaned out to Werder Bremen in the Bundesliga.

Forge have also benefited from incoming foreign talent. Alexander Achinioti-Jonsson is a prime example, having arrived for the inaugural season.

Influential import...Alexander Achinioti-Jonsson

It is a transfer that has worked out for both player and club; only two players have made more CPL appearances than the Swede, and it was his goal in the play-off final that secured the title in the shortened COVID campaign of 2020. He also scored in the shootout as Forge lost to Toronto FC on penalties in the 2020 Canadian Championship final. Forge remain the only CPL team to reach that stage of the competition, which has only ever been won by the country's MLS sides (Toronto, CF Montreal and Vancouver Whitecaps).

In addition, the 26-year-old – normally a midfielder – stepped in at centre-back for the 2022 campaign and was named CPL Defender of the Year. According to Achinioti-Jonsson, Forge's versatility is one of their biggest strengths: "It keeps the opponent guessing because you never really know what we'll do or where some players will play," he says. "You're hard to face when you're unpredictable, so I think that's definitely been a key to our success."

In October, Achinioti-Jonsson and Forge celebrated their third CPL title. The year before, they were defeated in the final by Pacific FC thanks to a goal from Alessandro Hojabrpour. Yet like all teams seeking to dominate their division, Forge promptly snapped up Hojabrpour, and the 2021 U21 Player of the Year went on to play a key role in regaining the title, opening the scoring in the 2-0 play-off final win over Atletico Ottawa.

As well as recruitment and youth development, big-game preparation has also been key to Forge's sustained success. "The one thing I've learned is you want to take as much pressure off the players as possible," says Smyrniotis. "Make the run-up to these games an enjoyable part of the season because the players have been through a long, gruelling season. In that moment, you have to find the right ways of keeping the environment light and making sure that you're focused on the four to five things that you need with that opponent on that day, and that's something we've been able to do."

Success story... former CPL centre-back Joel Waterman in action for Canada

> "Whether you're Manchester United or Real Madrid or Forge FC, everyone's had these moments that are pivotal in creating a story, in creating an identity, and creating basically an aura around the club"
>
> **Bobby Smyrniotis, Forge FC head coach and technical director**

He continues: "The only time we weren't able to do it was in 2021; 72 hours before the final we were playing a [CONCACAF League] semi-final second leg in Honduras."

Forward David Choiniere adds: "If you've never been to Honduras, it's not a straight flight. You have to take two flights before coming to Canada and those are strange hours, and then three days later you've got to play a final.

"There's no excuses, that's what we had to deal with, we had to adapt to the situation. But maybe that made the difference [in 2022], having seven days to fully prepare, to be home. That matters at the end of the day and played in our favour."

Forge were knocked out of the CONCACAF League (the continent's Europa League equivalent) on away goals in that 2021 clash with Motagua, but continental competition is far from a distraction for them. Instead, Forge see making a mark in the CONCACAF Champions League as a key step for both their club and league, especially as the competition expands from 16 teams to 27 in 2024.

The club had a taste of playing in CONCACAF's biggest club competition last year, losing 4-1 on aggregate to six-time champions Cruz Azul, yet they did enjoy a landmark moment

by playing at the historic Azteca stadium. Appearing on such a grand stage has already been highlighted as one of the club's most significant steps.

"I think that creates another pivotal moment in the short history of the club," says Smyrniotis of that game. "Whether you're Manchester United or Real Madrid or Forge FC, everyone's had these moments that are pivotal in creating a story, in creating an identity, and creating basically an aura around the club. That's what the importance of moments like playing at the Azteca against Cruz Azul is."

"They've played a World Cup [at the Azteca] and there's a lot of history behind the stadium," says Choiniere, Forge's goalscorer in Mexico. "Having the chance to play there with a good crowd against a great team, and scoring my first goal in the Champions League was a moment that I will not forget. I'm proud of it and I want to build on that."

Building on the already established success is also exactly what Forge are looking to do in 2023. "We already know the identity of what this club is," Borges says. "No matter what the situation is in terms of players and things like that, the standards are always going to be to win a championship."

The club feels everything is set for them to keep doing that. "We've created an identity where our obligation is to compete for championships, where our obligation is to become a household name in the CONCACAF region," coach Smyrniotis says. "We want to be able to keep on doing that in the whole region and have people within the football community knowing what we stand for, who we are, what the football is that we play, the players that are coming out of here and also making it a destination point for players in the CONCACAF region. I think, when you look at it, that's the overall vision that the Canadian Premier League has as well."

While Forge have been the CPL's dominant force, there is reason for everybody across the entire nation to get excited, as Smyrniotis adds: "We're in a fantastic country in all areas. Somehow we did not have a professional league for many years, so I think the only way is up from here on."

CONCACAF League...Alexander Achinioti-Jonsson in action against Motagua of Honduras in 2021

CANADIAN PREMIER LEAGUE 2023

ATLETICO OTTAWA
Manager: Carlos Gonzalez
Formed in 2020, they finished seventh and eighth respectively in their first two CPL campaigns. But last season saw a complete change of fortunes as they topped the regular season table before being beaten by Forge in the play-off final.

CAVALRY FC
Manager: Tommy Wheeldon Jr.
In the inaugural campaign, they came top in the regular season but were beaten in the play-off final. They've always been in the regular season's top three, but have fallen in the play-off semi-final the past two occasions – both times to the eventual champions.

FORGE FC
Manager: Bobby Smyrniotis
The team to catch in the CPL, after reaching all four of the play-off finals so far and winning three of them, as well as being the league's only team to reach a Canadian Championship final.

HFX WANDERERS
Manager: Patrice Gheisar
Came second in both the regular season and play-offs in the shortened 2020 campaign but have struggled outside of that, coming seventh last term. The signing of Canada Under-20 forward Tiago Coimbra joining from Palmeiras is intriguing.

PACIFIC FC
Manager: James Merriman
Their 2021 victory makes Pacific the only club outside of Forge FC to have won the North Star Shield, and they also reached the Canadian Championship semi-final that year. They will aim to return to that form despite Marco Bustos' departure.

VALOUR FC
Manager: Phillip Dos Santos
Looking for their first play-off appearance after finishing sixth in their first two seasons and fifth in the latest two. They will have to do so without the club's all-time top goalscorer, New Zealand's Moses Dyer, who joined USL Championship side FC Tulsa.

VANCOUVER FC
Manager: Afshin Ghotbi
The expansion team keeps the CPL at eight clubs after FC Edmonton were dissolved, but will aim to do more than merely make up the numbers. Their first-ever signing was a statement, as keeper Callum Irving joined from British Columbia rivals Pacific FC.

YORK UNITED
Manager: Martin Nash
Started out as York9 and were the first CPL team to be unveiled, before a rebranding in December 2020. Facilitated the CPL's first European transfer when midfielder Emilio Estevez joined ADO Den Haag. Three more players have moved to Europe since last summer.

eyewitness

Carl Worswick reports

COLOMBIA

Living the dream

Deportivo Pereira are enjoying unprecedented success thanks to their manager Alejandro Restrepo

The ache for redemption rarely wanes. It lingers and it festers and it warps. Yet for manager Alejandro Restrepo the sword of justice was swift to fall. The Colombian coach didn't mope around dwelling on the nagging ghosts from the past after being cruelly turfed out of his first proper club job at Colombian giants Atletico Nacional in February last year. It was the club he had supported as a kid and, having added a cup title to the Medellin team's trophy cabinet, the pain of his dismissal had smarted.

But, by the end of 2022, Nacional was a distant memory and the young manager was champion once again, this time at tiny Deportivo Pereira. The Medellin-born coach had transformed the club and crafted Pereira's finest hour in just a few months. For the first time in the team's 78-year history, *El Grande Matecana* were crowned Colombian league champions.

After a 1-1 draw away to Deportivo Independiente Medellin in the Clausura league final, Pereira played out a 0-0 stalemate in front of their packed

League winner ...Alejandro Restrepo with the trophy

Living the dream... Deportivo Pereira fans display a tifo during the league play-off final
Credit: Mauricio Duque Pinzon

Estadio Hernan Ramirez Villegas. From the penalty spot, Pereira goalkeeper Harlen "Chipi Chipi" Castillo saved twice to send the Risaralda city, nestled in the Andean foothills of Colombia's coffee region, into raptures. With the rain driving down, thousands of fans spilled onto the streets and into the city's main square to celebrate. In the stands at the Hernan Ramirez Villegas, TV cameras captured a moment that encapsulated this unforeseen drama: a young boy who had ripped off his shirt, now sobbing uncontrollably into the top's yellow and red colours. A few metres below, manager Restrepo was buried under a mountain of bodies along with Leider Berrio, the scorer of Pereira's decisive spot-kick.

"To provide this city with its best moment, its greatest achievement, is very special," Restrepo reflected just a few days before celebrating his 41st birthday. "I'm very proud to have given Pereira and its fans such happiness. But this only motivates me to keep working and improving as a coach in a job that provides as many highs as lows."

In just a few months Restrepo had tasted life at opposite spectrums of football's crazed game of wheel of fortune: sacked one day, champion the next. And the drive to expurgate the doubts of his Nacional exit by swiftly jumping in the Pereira hot seat wasn't without its sizeable risks. To not quite make it at Colombia's most successful club, winner of two Copa Libertadores and a record 17 league titles, was one thing. But failure at Pereira would have blunted his coaching career before it had even properly begun.

"Like everything in life, when you have to leave a place and don't want to, it's very hard – especially because [Nacional] had provided me with so many opportunities in my career," Restrepo ponders. "It's only human and it was a difficult and painful moment. But it's since become a strength because I look back and see how much I learnt from spending almost a year in charge of probably one of the most important teams in South America. So now, I just feel immense gratitude to Nacional."

The year 2022 had been quite the ride for the young coach. But it stood in deep contrast to the steady and diligent career path he had plodded up until then.

Born in 1982, his interest in football was piqued by his father who would passionately watch the big Copa Libertadores matches of the 1980s on TV. "When Atletico Nacional lifted the trophy in 1989, the first Colombian team to do so, I was hooked," Restrepo grins. "I was seven years old. I couldn't help but become crazy about football."

Very quickly, though, he realised he wouldn't make it as a player. He'd signed on at Medellin youth academy Club Deportivo Estudiantil as a teenager, but then reluctantly began studying systems engineering knowing that a professional career was unlikely. "I packed university in after four semesters because I knew my future had to involve football. It was why I then turned to coaching," Restrepo explains. "And that was the best decision I ever made."

Starting with a kids' team in his early 20s, Restrepo patiently climbed through the different age categories. In the more than 15 years he spent at Estudiantil, he plundered more trophies than he can remember until eventually he became the club's head coach. "We won lots of championships and I helped put a structure in place for the whole organisation," Restrepo recalls. "We grew together and it was the best coaching experience I could have ever had. I learnt so much there."

His success at Estudiantil opened the door to new projects, including a short spell as assistant coach of the Colombia U17s, "a fundamental step that helped me look at football in a different light."

Then followed a complete break from football. In 2019, Restrepo sneaked off to London where he spent six months studying English. "You never know what

Play-off final... Restrepo watches on during the play-off final victory
Instagram: corpereira

Atletico Nacional coach...Restrepo on the sidelines during one of his interim spells in charge in 2019

lies ahead in life and not everything is planned out for your future," Restrepo attests. "I've always had it in my head to make myself better, to keep challenging myself. So, why not immerse myself in a different language and culture?"

It was the calm before the storm. On his return came the call from Atletico Nacional. Initially appointed U20s boss, Restrepo was twice named interim coach of the club where he had also had the chance to work closely with Brazilian manager Paulo Autuori and former Mexico coach Juan Carlos Osorio, one of his big influences, whom he describes as a man "with revolutionary ideas."

In June 2021, he was given the job on a permanent basis. It was his first proper taste of life in the managerial hot seat. Years of silent toil now ready to put to the test.

"He's completely ready to assume this role. In Alejandro, I'm convinced we've found someone for whom the sky is the limit," Nacional president Emilio Gutierrez gushed, seeking to placate supporter fears about Restrepo's inexperience.

But despite helping Nacional to their first trophy for three years by winning the Colombian Cup in November 2021 (curiously, against Pereira in the final), his reign would be cut short after the club were dumped out of the 2022 Copa Libertadores in the qualifiers.

Just weeks later, a very different challenge landed on his desk. For eight years up until 2019, Pereira had been languishing in the second division. Strangled by a liquidation process that had dragged on for the best part of a decade and had almost led to the club's disappearance, there was still no money to spend when Restrepo took charge of the team in May 2022. Instead he had just a few weeks to bring in a couple of free transfers and cobble together an all-Colombian ragtag team of fading journeymen and unknown youth players. Nobody expected a title charge when Pereira kicked off their Colombian Clausura season in July. Indeed, nervous fans were more concerned about again dropping out of the top flight.

But, after a slow start, Pereira's season quickly gathered steam. Having qualified for the semi-finals following a do-or-die win against Atletico Bucaramanga in the final round of the regular season, Pereira were drawn alongside Barranquilla giants Junior, and Bogota's two biggest sides, Santa Fe and Millonarios, in a four-team group. Their rivals had 33 league titles between them. Even for the most optimistic of Pereira fans, they were simply there to make up the numbers.

Champions... Deportivo Pereira celebrate with the league trophy *Instagram: corpereira*

Yet Restrepo knew his team stood a chance. "We were competing well, we were the best away team in the division and luckily we didn't have many injuries," he explains. "And then, in the semi-finals, we hit form at the right time."

Pereira won their group by edging out big title favourites Millonarios to qualify for the final. Opponents Medellin were still strong favourites, but Restrepo had unfinished business to address.

When his Nacional side had beaten Pereira in the Colombian Cup final a year previous, Restrepo had denied the Risaralda club the chance of competing in the Copa Libertadores for the first time in its history. But with victory in the league final a year later, it was now Restrepo who could claim the honour of escalating Pereira to their debut appearance in South America's elite club competition.

> **Strangled by a liquidation process that had dragged on for the best part of a decade and had almost led to the club's disappearance, there was still no money to spend when Restrepo took charge in May 2022**

Yet success came at a price. The title win was soon followed by a mass exodus from the championship-winning team, as players on short contracts accepted better offers from bigger teams and left. Nobody had foreseen Pereira's success coming. Nobody had planned ahead.

When the 2023 Colombian Apertura season kicked off at the end of January, only three Pereira players who had started the league final just six weeks earlier were in the starting XI. Gone was penalty hero Castillo, midfielder Berrio, who had buried the all-important last kick, and leading goalscorer Leonardo Castro. For Pereira's long-awaited maiden appearance in the Copa Libertadores, Restrepo would have to practically start from scratch.

"It's not easy. You need to have the capacity to understand and adapt to the reality of Colombian football, how our culture works, how football bosses and club directors think," Restrepo muses. "We have signed over 13 players and have had to try to get them up to speed on our idea of play, our structure of play. But we are very excited about playing in the Copa Libertadores. We want to represent Colombia in the best possible way."

The capricious nature of South American football is a familiar story, on a continent used to its finest talent being picked to the bones. Even so, the odds will be heavily stacked against Pereira when the Copa Libertadores rolls into town at the start of April. As Colombian champions, they bypassed the qualifying rounds, but their lack of pedigree at this level means that they were seeded in pot four ahead of the draw, which takes place on March 22.

But in Restrepo, the coffee-region club have one of Colombia's brightest young coaches who isn't done yet in wanting to cause surprises. "We'll be ready," he assures. "This is a dream for every Pereira fan and so I want us to go out there and show everyone what we can do."

eye witness

Tim Vickery reports

ECUADOR

Independiente del Valle: the heart of Ecuador

A barely credible 12 of Ecuador's World Cup squad in Qatar have a connection with one tiny club from the outskirts of Quito. Surprise pick Kevin Rodriguez only joined Independiente del Valle after the tournament, centre-forward Michael Estrada had a short spell with the club in his early twenties, while

Independiente del Valle connection... #11 Michael Estrada, #21 Alan Franco, #8 Carlos Gruezo, #17 Angelo Preciado, #23 Moises Caicedo, #3 Piero Hincapie and #19 Gonzalo Plata

Estadio Banco Guayaquil...the home of Independiente del Valle

Jackson Porozo was briefly in the youth ranks as a teenager. The other nine graduated from the academy.

The Independiente del Valle connection was most clearly seen in central midfield. Ecuador's anchorman was Jhegson Mendez, a club product who was sold abroad in 2018, making space for Alan Franco, who made his move in 2020, creating the opportunity for Moises Caicedo, who shone brightly and briefly at home before making the move to Brighton. Now the three of them were all together representing their country with distinction. Their former club, then, have rapidly become a global reference for youth development – from origins that could hardly have been more humble.

Independiente del Valle are from Sangolqui, a suburb of Quito with around 80,000 inhabitants known as "The heart of the valley". The little amateur club was founded in 1958 as the project of Jose Teran – founder, president and, in the early days, team captain as well. Two years after his 1975 death the club was renamed Independiente del Valle Jose Teran in his honour, and life went on in local Quito leagues. Then, in 2006, came the takeover that would shake Ecuador and send strong ripples around South America and the world.

The man behind the acquisition was Michel Deller, a local businessman with a track record in shopping malls, fast food and property. Deller and his colleagues are football supporters from a business background who identified an opportunity. "In the last few decades," said Deller a few years back, "Ecuadorian football has grown a lot. In an exponential manner."

He is correct. Until the Copa America of 1993 when they reached the semi-finals, Ecuador's record in the competition had been like something from the chamber of horrors. They were a Latin American Luxembourg. But now they were making progress, appearing in their first World Cup in 2002 and getting out of the group stage four years later. The wheels were already rolling, and then along came Independiente del Valle to put their foot on the accelerator.

Talent factory... Moises Caicedo celebrates scoring in the 2020 Libertadores with Piero Hincapie (left) and William Pacho (right)

The idea was to develop and sell young players. The club name was changed to Club Especializado de Alto Rendimento (Specialised Club of High Performance) Independiente del Valle. Right from the start the focus was on youth. It made for a rocky few years. They made it into the third division, the lowest professional tier, in 2007. The following year they were nearly relegated, but a year later they were promoted to the second division.

It was in the second tier that the club's focus on young players first began to bear fruit. After 19 goals in 37 matches across two seasons, winger Jefferson Montero was signed by La Liga side Villarreal, later going on to play in the Premier League for Swansea City. His goals helped Independiente del Valle reach the top flight for the first time in their history.

Their debut top-flight campaign almost ended in relegation. But they held on and, as the benefits of their structure began to kick in, they were soon able to consolidate their first-division status.

"We want to demonstrate the potential of the Ecuadorian player if you give him opportunity and if he has been formed in the adequate manner," said Deller. "That is the essence of the project."

The club has made a huge investment in structure – a training ground with seven quality pitches plus an indoor swimming pool, gyms, a hotel and a school. "We saw the potential of having a club with better structure," said Deller, "especially in formation, working on the social part, in the intellectual and human development of the players, and also transmitting values to the local community and the country."

A few years back Independiente del Valle donated gate receipts from their Copa Libertadores campaign to areas suffering the consequences of an earthquake. "We seek to give priority to the human side," said Deller, while also stressing a belief in "European concepts."

The club's coaches have come from a number of different countries – Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, Portugal and Spain – as well as Ecuador. The turnover has been surprisingly fast. But the ideas that guide youth development have been more of a constant, and based largely on principles from Spain. Independiente del Valle have enjoyed a partnership with the Qatari Aspire Academy, an endeavour with a similar Spanish touch. It was from Aspire that Independiente took gifted young Spanish coach Miguel Angel Ramirez,

whose time in charge was relatively short, but is probably the coach who is most connected to the club and its philosophy.

Currently with Sporting Gijon, Ramirez was initially hired as a youth specialist after six years with Aspire. He already had a name among the cognoscenti, and it was expected that he would have a long spell directing the youth operation. But he had only been in Ecuador for a year when first-team coach Ismael Rescalvo, another Spaniard, was seduced by Emelec of Guayaquil, one of the country's traditional giants. Ramirez was hurriedly promoted, and a few months later Independiente del Valle had a title to their name – and it was a glamorous international one.

They won the 2019 Copa Sudamericana, the country's Europa League equivalent, with a stylish 3-1 triumph over Colon of Argentina in a final played in Asuncion, Paraguay. They had to overcome a tropical downpour and a stadium filled with fans of their opponents, but the Ecuadorians were worthy winners. And it was barely a surprise. On their way to the final they went to Sao Paulo and beat Corinthians 2-0, with the Brazilians confessing that they had been on the wrong end of a footballing lesson. This is off the scale of extraordinary – the biggest club in the biggest city in South America humbled in front of their own fans by a little team from Ecuador who hardly anyone had even heard about a decade earlier.

By 2019, though, Independiente del Valle were no longer unknowns. They made the continent sit up and take notice three years earlier when they reached the final of the Copa Libertadores after a sequence of giantkillings. After very nearly falling in the qualifying rounds, they knocked out River Plate and beat Boca Juniors home and away before falling 2-1 on aggregate to Atletico Nacional of Colombia.

The final was lost but the mission was accomplished. Uruguayan coach Pablo Repetto had an experienced trio of his compatriots to add ballast and help out a team of Ecuadorian youngsters, almost all of whom were sold in the wake of the competition. But reaching the final meant that in the future the mission would go through a slight change. The priority remains the production and sale of players. But to their own surprise, the club realised that despite the constant selling they could also compete for titles. That 2019 Copa Sudamericana win was not an isolated afternoon.

Copa Sudamericana victors...Independiente del Valle players lift the 2022 trophy

There was a slight change in the club's recruitment policy. They continued to look for experienced names to give the side structure and aid the development of the youngsters – veteran Argentine holding midfielder Cristian Pellerano is the outstanding example. But they also brought a keen eye to the market to search for players who could fit into their passing philosophy and ensure the team remain competitive.

Their best bet has been Lorenzo Faravelli, another Argentine midfielder, whose push and run style had previously been undervalued. Faravelli was the key man as Independiente del Valle won their first domestic league title at the end of 2021. And he was also instrumental, scoring a wonderful goal, as they beat Sao Paulo 2-0 less than 12 months later to win their second Copa Sudamericana. Brazil has enjoyed a recent monopoly of continental titles, but it was broken, against one of their traditional giants, by this remarkable little club from Ecuador.

> "We want to demonstrate the potential of the Ecuadorian player if you give him opportunity and if he has been formed in the adequate manner. That is the essence of the project"
>
> **Independiente del Valle owner Michel Deller**

The 2022 side was older and more Argentine-based than most of the team's past line-ups, coming in the interval between the sale of 2021 league winners and the emergence of the next generation. That next generation will surely emerge – though with the club now on the radar, the trend is for their youth products to be sold at an earlier age. Piero Hincapie, for example, only played three games before being whisked off to Talleres in Argentina. Currently he is impressing in Germany with Bayer Leverkusen.

Every bit as important as these senior conquests are the club's equally incredible achievements in the Under-20 version of the Libertadores. In each of the last three versions they have reached the final, with a victory over Argentina's River Plate coming between narrow defeats to Nacional and Penarol of Uruguay.

With their size and focus on selling, there is a ceiling to what Independiente del Valle can achieve. They are already punching way above their weight. But their graduates go out into the world equipped for greatness. In 2019 Ecuador were South American Under-20 champions and came third in the World Cup at the same level – with a squad in which most of the key players were from Independiente del Valle. That partially applies to the senior squad that acquitted itself so well in Qatar, and, with the production line working overtime, Ecuador could be one of the teams to watch in 2026. Today Sangolqui, tomorrow the world.

Influential...former head coach Miguel Angel Ramirez

INDEPENDIENTE DEL VALLE DOZEN

The 12 Independiente del Valle-associated players included in Ecuador's 2022 World Cup squad:

Moises Caicedo	*Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng)*
Michael Estrada	*Cruz Azul (Mex)*
Alan Franco	*Talleres (Arg)*
Carlos Gruezo	*San Jose Earthquakes (USA)*
Piero Hincapie	*Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)*
Jhegson Mendez	*Sau Paulo (Bra)*
William Pacho	*Antwerp (Bel)*
Gonzalo Plata	*Real Valladolid (Spa)*
Jackson Porozo	*Troyes (Fra)*
Angelo Preciado	*Genk (Bel)*
Moises Ramirez	*Independiente del Valle*
Kevin Rodriguez	*Independiente del Valle*

TOMORROW'S STARS TODAY

Talentscout

SOUTH AMERICAN U20 STARS OF THE TOURNAMENT

Words Tim Vickery

Luciano RODRIGUEZ

Liverpool

In a sentence
The essence of the South American Under-20 Championship: a player who spent last year in the Uruguayan second division and now appears on the wish list of European giants.

What they say
"I congratulate you for the great goals and for the great tournament that you are playing. I'm full of admiration for the commitment and the quality that you are showing."
Luis Suarez, Uruguay legend

The story so far
Luciano was born in Montevideo on July 16 – a special date for Uruguayans because it is the anniversary of the 1950 World Cup victory – along with twin brother Emiliano, a reserve striker in the Under-20 squad. The pair came through Uruguay's renowned Baby Football – a smaller pitch, smaller side youth game – and went on to the Bella Vista club. Luciano then suffered an injury, had an unsuccessful trial with Fluminense in Brazil and ended up at Progreso, making his debut after the pandemic, and soon gaining a reputation as one of his country's most promising young players. At the end of 2021 the side was relegated. He spent 2022 in the second division, joining Liverpool at the end of the year.

The next step
These are exciting times for Liverpool, a traditional neighbourhood club, who prepare for their debut in the group stage of the Copa Libertadores. This promises to be invaluable experience for a player who will surely not be with the club for long. The tiny size of the domestic market inevitably transforms Uruguayan football into an export industry and, after performing so impressively at the Under-20 Championship in Colombia, Rodriguez is not short of foreign suitors. It will be a big surprise if Liverpool do not cash in during the summer transfer window, meaning Rodriguez will have to prepare himself for changes and challenges.

> Rodriguez is not short of foreign suitors. It will be a big surprise if Liverpool Montevideo do not cash in during the summer transfer window

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT RODRIGUEZ

- Rodriguez has reportedly attracted interest from Real Madrid, who already have his Uruguay U20 team-mate Alvaro Rodriguez on their books.
- Luciano's nickname is "the Pearl".
- Rodriguez scored one of the goals of the tournament against Ecuador: a thumping 25-yard shot in the 84th minute to seal a 2-1 victory.

Strengths
Strong as a horse, Rodriguez can operate all across the attacking line. In Colombia he did well on both wings and also, when the team were looking to play on the counter attack, as a centre-forward. As a winger he showed the capacity to work back in his own half. He has strength on the ball and can operate in reduced space. He assesses the situation quickly, and has a competent left foot as well as a cannonball right. The range of his talent makes it surprising that he did not win wider recognition earlier.

Weaknesses
It could be that his very versatility might become a problem. Will his ability to fill so many roles make it harder to define his long-term footballing identity? It is a possibility. Another unknown is how he will react to the burdens of expectation of his new found fame. Post-Colombia, though, that is a nice problem to have.

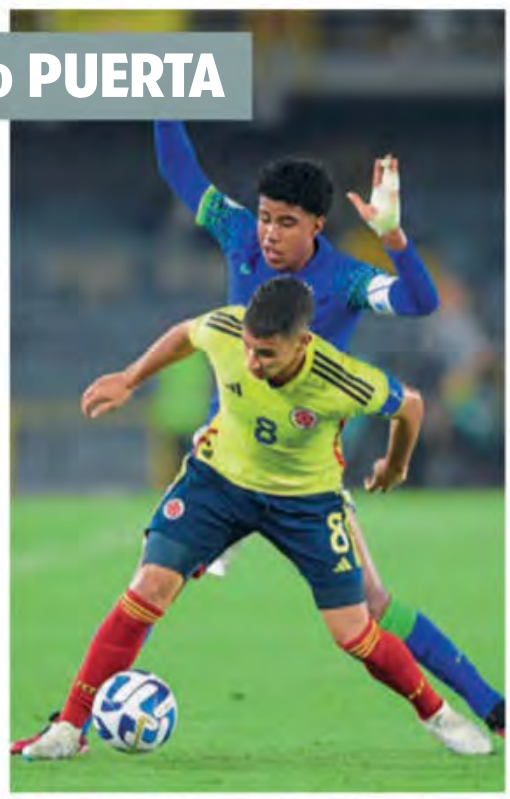
Andrey SANTOS

Chelsea (Eng)
Recently signed by Chelsea after helping Vasco da Gama out of the Brazilian second division. Captain and midfield powerhouse. Strong and uncomplicated, wins the ball, passes safely out of defence, chooses sensible options and has the gift of breaking into the box to score vital goals.

Fabricio DIAZ

Liverpool
Captain and midfielder with more than 100 pro games behind him, who was included in Uruguay's initial 55-man pre-World Cup squad. Faded badly towards the end of a gruelling tournament but, while he had gas in the tank, he kept the side knitted together and distributed the ball as if he had a set of golf clubs in his right foot. A set-piece specialist.

Gustavo PUERTA



Nuremberg (Ger)
Took on third-place Colombia's captaincy after Aston Villa signing Jhon Duran was forced out on the eve by his new club. Central midfielder and a magnificent striker of the ball. Signed from Bogota by Bayer Leverkusen in the course of the competition, and immediately loaned out to Nuremberg in the second tier.

Vitor ROQUE

Athletico Paranaense
Hulking centre-forward who offers promise in what has been a problem position for Brazil. Already a consolidated figure after leaving Cruzeiro last year and joining the club that went all the way to the Copa Libertadores final. Strong and mobile, leads the line, excellent on the turn and a cool finisher. Joint-top scorer (with Andrey Santos) at the U20 South American Championship with six goals.

Yeltzin ERIQUE

LDU Quito
Left-back who used his speed both to run the line and supply attacking crosses, as well as to help cover his centre-backs. One of the few bright points of a rather disappointing side – though Ecuador did just enough to finish fourth and qualify for the Under-20 World Cup in May and June – and one of the few players who managed to keep his place throughout.

Gilberto FLORES

Libertad
Centre-back in the great Paraguayan tradition. Tough and unfussy, as rugged and uncompromising as a nightclub bouncer, and also offers a threat from set-pieces in the opposing box. Has plenty of first-team experience and now faces an important consolidation year. His nation edged out Argentina and Peru in Group A, but they finished bottom of the six-team final group.

Sebastian BOSELLI

Defensor
The outstanding centre-back of the tournament. Classy and tough, Boselli consistently came out on top in pressure situations with big headers and vital interceptions. His performance against Brazil centre-forward Vitor Roque in the decisive last game was a masterclass, although he couldn't help prevent a 2-0 defeat which saw *La Celeste* just miss out on winning the tournament.

ARTHUR

America Mineiro
Just turned 20 and one of the older members of Brazil's Under-20 title-winning squad. A quick, neat, solid and unflashy right-back whose progress will be followed with real interest given Brazil's recent dearth of options in the position. Can attack (as proven by his two assists – a joint-high for his team at the tournament) and defend with efficiency, as well as construct from midfield. Also a long-throw specialist.

THE PROFESSOR OF DRIBBLING

Brighton and Japan winger Kaoru Mitoma knows so much about dribbling he wrote a thesis on it

Words: Mike Plastow

Kaoru Mitoma is the Japanese enigma who has taken the Premier League by storm since the World Cup, yet only became a 90-minute player for Brighton & Hove Albion in November. He headed his first Premier League goal in that first full match against Wolverhampton Wanderers just before going to Qatar, and followed it up with further goals against Arsenal, Everton, Leicester City and Bournemouth after returning from the World Cup. There was also a sublime late winner against Liverpool in the FA Cup, a masterclass of vision and tight ball control.

Even at the World Cup, Mitoma, arguably Japan's most influential player, was entirely restricted to appearances from the bench. Samurai Blue coach Hajime Moriyasu's strategy was to save his most dangerous players until late on and hit his opponents when they had no time to regroup and respond, but the result was that the world only caught glimpses of Mitoma's magic.

That magic starts with the dribbling. In recent months, a lot has been made of the fact that Mitoma wrote his university thesis on dribbling; that it was no mere academic study is blindingly obvious every time he touches the ball. Mitoma's now trademark technique requires tremendous skill as well as understanding. His use of the outside of his foot gives him extra speed by letting his legs run naturally, allows him to keep his head up to see around him, and also makes it easier for him to push the ball either way, left or right, leaving opponents not knowing which way to turn.

BRIGHTON & HOVE
ALBION
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EXPRESS

Coming on as Japan's super sub, Mitoma showed he could do all of that against the best in last June's pre-World Cup friendly against Brazil. Japan lost the match 1-0 but the game perfectly confirmed Mitoma's quality in forcing even top-quality opponents to pull back and defend. His dynamic dribbling skill was demonstrated again against Germany, Spain and Croatia at the World Cup, and is now being observed week in and week out in the Premier League. If you are a defender, you don't want to face Mitoma in a one-on-one situation. Whoever you may be, he is a job for two or three players.

Another key is Mitoma's efficiency. When he gets the ball everything he does, from his exquisite first touch, is done for a purpose. He is not a dribbler who hangs onto the ball. Mitoma dribbles to deliver. He is also not a dribbler who loses sight of the play around him. He watches while he dribbles and sees what is going on. He does not chase every ball, but does chase every ball he can possibly get. That fine judgement was exemplified, of course, by his spectacular assist for Ao Tanaka's goal against Spain at the World Cup, where he kept the ball in by barely a millimetre in what became the most talked-about VAR decision in Qatar. Of course, Mitoma himself could not have known he had kept that ball in, but he knew it was worth chasing.

For Japan supporters, perhaps the big discovery at the World Cup was how much Mitoma's defensive qualities have also grown. The trademark Mitoma move during his time at then-Japanese champions Kawasaki Frontale was to dribble in from the left to the goal line and cut back, either with a pass across the face of the goal to a team-mate or by bringing it back himself to score. His ability to pick out the player in space and provide pinpoint crosses was matched by his laser accurate shooting when the space in front of the goal was his own. His weakness was that he tended to be a bit of a single-pattern player, though it was a single pattern that produced goal after goal.

That revelation about his defensive qualities came in the second half against Germany, when Moriyasu brought on almost all of his best attackers at once and used Mitoma as a wing-back. Mitoma was magnificent in blunting the German attack with his calm judgement and superb positional sense, plus the constant threat he posed himself by going forward. Mitoma showed those defensive qualities again against Spain and Croatia, honed, no doubt, through a lot of hard work in Belgium and Brighton.

Dribbling to deliver... everything Mitoma does is done for a purpose

Trademark technique...Mitoma darts between two Wolverhampton Wanderers players

The press have also made a big thing about what a bargain Mitoma was for Brighton at only €3 million. That is more than understandable given the recent estimates that his value has now risen ten-fold, at least. But the fee paid by the Seagulls was actually a Frontale record for a player leaving the league for Europe. Mitoma could not play for Brighton right away because of visa issues – he didn't have the necessary national team appearances – and so spent the 2021-22 season on loan at Belgian club Union Saint-Gilloise, but his quality as Japan's most exciting player was never in doubt. The bigger questions, really, are why J. League players do not command higher prices than they do, and why Moriyasu took so long to induct him into the national team.

Regarding the first, the stock of Japanese players in Britain is now growing thanks to the contributions of such figures as Takehiro Tomiyasu at Arsenal, and Daizen Maeda and Kyogo Furuhashi at Celtic. Still, there is a long way to go. The J. League remains a bargain basement for clubs with the gumption and vision to go looking there. A few more managers with direct J. League experience like Ange Postecoglou could work wonders in the transfer market. Japan has, after all, made the last 16 at three of the last four World Cups, despite never receiving a top-two seeding in its group, and no one should be surprised its sophisticated academy systems are producing outstanding players.

As for the second question, perhaps it was Mitoma's single-pattern image that held Moriyasu back. There was also a lot of competition on the left, including Maeda, Furuhashi, Genki Haraguchi, Takumi Minamino and Takefusa Kubo, so Mitoma had a lot to prove. Moriyasu, however, was never blind to Mitoma's qualities. While talking about team strategy, the national team manager once notably said: "Mitoma is himself a strategy."

> A lot has been made of the fact that Mitoma wrote his university thesis on dribbling; that it was no mere academic study is blindingly obvious every time he touches the ball

And that is the simple truth. When Mitoma is on the pitch, he is hugely influential even at his most quiet. Whether playing it to Mitoma, making space for Mitoma or, on the other side, watching and guarding against Mitoma, in both Frontale and Japan games, play quickly started to revolve around him. It will be interesting to see how far this may happen at Brighton, too.

So, who is Kaoru Mitoma?

Mitoma was born on May 20, 1997 in Kawasaki, two years before Kawasaki Frontale became founding members of the J. League's second division. Back in those days, Kawasaki was also the home of the early J. League giants Verdy Kawasaki, who won the first two J. League titles in 1993 and 1994 before moving to Tokyo in 2001 to become Tokyo Verdy. Nevertheless, Mitoma undoubtedly grew up in a football city.

At the age of nine he was recruited into Frontale's inaugural Under-10 team along with Koji Miyoshi (Antwerp) and future Qatar World Cup team-mate Ko Itakura (Borussia Monchengladbach). Mitoma and Itakura also started out at the same boys' team in Kawasaki, Saginuma SC, as did World Cup team-mates Shuichi Gonda (Shimizu S-Pulse) and Ao Tanaka (Fortuna Dusseldorf). Gonda was considerably older but Tanaka, a year younger than Mitoma, especially loved to practise with him. The understanding they developed as young boys may have played a part in that astonishing goal against Spain. Either way, far from the eyes of the world, the city of Kawasaki was producing a golden generation.

An extraordinary photo did the rounds on Twitter last year showing Frontale legend Kengo Nakamura leading the young Mitoma, kitted out in the Frontale home strip, onto the pitch before a J. League game. Mitoma in fact declined a professional contract with Frontale when leaving high school in 2016, just before the start of Frontale's own golden era. Frontale went on to win their first J. League title in 2017, and

VAR controversy...Mitoma keeps the ball in, barely, during Japan's World Cup clash with Spain

repeated the feat in 2018, 2020 and 2021, while Mitoma chose to study physical education at Tsukuba University and only re-joined the club for those last two triumphant campaigns.

Mitoma's decision was not as strange at it might seem in the West. Many J. League players do still opt for university first, and the university teams are not at all bad. World Cup and Frontale team-mate Shogo Taniguchi, for example, was also a Tsukuba graduate. Looking further back, such former Japan greats as Masami Ihara and Masashi Nakayama, who both played at Japan's first World Cup in 1998, went to Tsukuba, as did Kozo Tashima, the current president of the Japan Football Association.

Mitoma had his share of glory at university, including two giantkilling goals for Tsukuba University against Vegalta Sendai in the Emperor's Cup (Japan's domestic cup and oldest football competition) in 2017. He was also registered on a special contract with Frontale from 2017, concurrent with his university team, and made his first-team debut against Nagoya Grampus in the 2019 League Cup semi-final. He finally signed professional terms with Frontale in 2020 after graduating from university.

Mitoma scored 21 goals in 50 league appearances for Frontale in 2020 and the first half of 2021. In his debut season he netted double figures for both goals and assists (12 and 13 respectively), and was voted onto the J. League's Best XI for 2020. In his one-and-a-half years with Frontale's first team, he won the J. League, Emperor's Cup and Super Cup.

Impressive loan... Mitoma spent last season at Union Saint-Gilloise

Japanese fans will always rue the fact that Mitoma's club career in Japan coincided squarely with the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that precious few had the chance to see him play live in the stadium.

The full transfer to Brighton in the summer of 2021 halted the burgeoning flood of trophies and actually took him to the Seagulls' sister club Union Saint-Gilloise of Belgium, also owned by Tony Bloom, while he waited for a full UK visa.

His arrival coincided with the club's first season in the top flight since 1973, and a remarkable and unlikely title challenge followed. After making his debut in September, and scoring his first goal in the Belgian Cup nine days later, he truly announced his arrival by scoring a spectacular hat-trick to lift his team to a 4-2 win against RFC Seraing after they had a player sent off and fallen two goals behind. He ended the campaign with seven goals and three assists as Union finished second.

After the move to Europe, Mitoma's Japan debut followed in a World Cup qualifier against Oman. Predictably, he was brought on as the super sub and, in typical Mitoma fashion, cut in from the left to provide the pass for Junya Ito's match-winning goal. Mitoma then also netted the two late goals in Australia that secured Japan's passage to the 2022 World Cup.

If he settled in quickly at Saint-Gilloise, Mitoma's debut season at Brighton started slowly. Perhaps Brighton did not fully realise what a player they had until they saw him at the World Cup. Mitoma had to wait until October 29 for his first league start, against Chelsea, and his four games off the bench in Qatar did nothing to change his super sub label. They were, however, four striking performances that caught the eye of the world.

The story since then is familiar. It has been a sea change at Brighton. Brighton have found their man and seem likely to use him for every minute they can, fully aware that richer clubs could soon swoop in. "I could never substitute him because I felt he could score," said Brighton manager Roberto De Zerbi after his late winner against Bournemouth in February. Mitoma is the super sub no more.

> "Mitoma is himself a strategy"
> Japan national team manager Hajime Moriyasu

"Extraordinary image"...Kawasaki Frontale legend Kengo Nakamura leads out a young Kaoru Mitoma ahead of a J. League fixture

Student...Mitoma in action for Tsukuba University during their giantkilling run in the 2017 Emperor's Cup

National hero... Mitoma celebrates sealing Japan's place at the 2022 World Cup after scoring against Australia

SPECIAL FEATURE

THE ROAD TO BERLIN

The 2024 European Championship is rolling into view

Words: Nick Bidwell

At the risk of straying into the dubious area of national stereotypes, Germans have an undeniable flair for organisation, so it is no surprise that their preparations for Euro 2024 are going full steam ahead.

With a little more than 12 months until the big kick-off, Germany's football federation (DFB), the ten host cities and national and regional government are busy synchronising their efforts. The Tournament Steering Group – comprising representatives from UEFA, German football, federal government ministers and local mayors – have been in session since last October. Meanwhile, ex-*Nationalmannschaft* skipper turned Euro 2024 tournament director Philipp Lahm is doing a sterling job on both the directorial and promotional fronts.

As World Cup hosts in 2006, Germany put on a masterclass and there is every reason to believe that next year's European Championship will be equally successful. After all, the Germans do not have to exactly re-invent the wheel. Thanks to their

excellent transport infrastructure, hotel facilities, telecommunication and broadcasting know-how and plethora of exceptional stadia, they are already ahead of the game.

"All our cities' sites are on the right road," says Euro 2024 CEO Markus Stenger.

No need to build new grounds, as in Qatar. Nine of the ten stadia chosen – Berlin, Dortmund, Munich, Cologne, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Leipzig, Frankfurt and Gelsenkirchen – staged World Cup 2006 fixtures. Even Dusseldorf's Merkur Spiel-Arena, the only new kid on the block, has been in situ since 2004. Nuremberg and Hanover – host cities at the 2006 World Cup – can consider themselves unfortunate not to make the cut. So can Bremen and Monchengladbach. The former's Weserstadion, which was completely rebuilt in 2008, is a jewel of an arena, while Gladbach's Borussia Park, constructed in 2004, is just as stunning.

Berlin's massive 74,461-capacity Olympiastadion, where the final will be

Venues

Ten cities will host matches at the 2024 European Championship

BERLIN

Olympiastadion (Hertha Berlin)
Capacity: 74,461

MUNICH

Allianz Arena (Bayern Munich)
Capacity: 70,076

DORTMUND

Westfalenstadion (Borussia Dortmund)
Capacity: 65,849

STUTTGART

Mercedes-Benz Arena (Stuttgart)
Capacity: 54,906

GELSENKIRCHEN

Arena AufSchalke (Schalke)
Capacity: 54,740

contested, is the largest venue. With 42,600 seats, the Red Bull Arena in Leipzig is the smallest. Incidentally, the RB Leipzig stadium is a rare instance of German plans going somewhat awry. When awarded these finals in the autumn of 2018, the Leipzig stadium project had featured a vow to increase the ground's volume to 46,635 seats. Two capacity-boosting reconstruction phases did take place, only for the third and final one to be put on ice. UEFA still gave the green light.

"For the European Championship, the Leipzig stadium will be small with a second-rate capacity but overall it's a fine arena," declared Hermann Winkler, the president of the regional Saxony football association. Leipzig mayor Burkhard Jung echoed the sentiments, saying: "Apart from the ground capacity, we've met all the requirements. From car parking, more toilets, better floodlights and an improved evacuation process. I'm sure UEFA will have no problem." Fortunately for Leipzig, he was right.

Of all the Euro 2024 venues, Dusseldorf is arguably the most excited locale. Present and correct when Germany held the 1974 World Cup and Euro '88, the swanky Rhine metropolis was more than a little upset to be cut out of the 2006 World Cup party. Now the city's good citizens are eagerly looking forward to 2024, when they will host no fewer than five European Championship games. In a recent opinion poll, 88 per cent of Dusseldorf inhabitants said they were delighted that Euro 2024 was coming to town; 85 per cent believed the tournament would have a positive effect on the city's image.

Taking their cue from the vibrant, convivial atmosphere generated at World Cup 2006, Dusseldorf plan to have three separate city-centre Fan Zones, each with their big video screen, entertainment timetable and food and drink outlets. These packed downtown hubs were instrumental to the success of World Cup 2006.

The Germans are keen that Euro 2024 is not confined to the stadia. All the host cities will present a programme of cultural events and aim to showcase local products and artisans. With the German economy likely to be facing a recession, this special marketplace could well prove to be an especially rewarding anti-slump operation.

At a time when the German Green Party is much to the fore – a coalition partner in the federal government and very prominent in regional legislatures – it is fitting that this European Championship boasts a wide streak of sustainability, pro-environment measures and inclusivity. A key goal, for example, is to reduce the carbon impact of team and spectator transport. To achieve this, the tournament schedule will be tweaked to keep journeys as short as possible. Another important priority is the "barrier free" concept for disabled/limited mobility fans.

"We want the players, the coaches, everyone else – and naturally the fans – to be happy to come to our country and enjoy a real festival atmosphere," says Lahm. "But we also want to make an impact on society and that means highlighting such topics as sustainability, the environment and the common good. All these things play a role and, as we build towards the tournament, we want all fans to be a part of it. This tournament, this festival is for them.

"We have beautiful cities and great stadia. For our country, I'm hoping for a community experience similar to what we had at the 2006 World Cup and the Women's World Championship in 2011.

"We aim to be outstanding hosts, to show who we are."

Automatically qualified as hosts, Germany will inevitably be one of the favourites among bookmakers to lift the trophy. But in truth, even the most rabid German

Rebuild required ...Germany head coach Hansi Flick

> "We aim to be outstanding hosts, to show who we are"
>
> **Tournament director Philipp Lahm**

Tournament director... Philipp Lahm

supporter would not expect a fourth continental crown. In each of the last three major international tournaments, the *Nationalmannschaft* have sunk without trace and coach Hansi Flick has a monumental rebuilding task in front of him. With time extremely tight and no competitive football to hone their sharpness, Euro 2024 respectability may be the most realistic objective.

Sadly for the Germans, they have let their standards slip in recent times, falling behind the likes of France, Spain, England and Portugal. According to the laws of probability, one of this quartet is likely to prevail in Berlin. However, nothing in football is cut and dried and we should expect the unexpected. Could Germany shock us with an electrifying spurt of backyard momentum? Will the Netherlands find another gear under new coach Ronald Koeman? Can reigning European champions Italy bounce back after their shock non qualification for Qatar 2022? Will Croatia continue to be the great over-achievers on the international stage?

Intangibles make the world go round and extra European Championship spice could take many forms. Imagine Norway, energised by their irrepressible talisman Erling Haaland and talented playmaker Martin Odegaard, qualifying for their first international tournament in nearly a quarter-of-a-century. Or the embattled Ukrainians securing a place at the German party, a symbol of defiant resistance writ large. Pitted against the mighty England and Italy in their qualifying group, the Ukrainians will have to pull out all the stops, but stranger things have happened.

And it certainly would be very interesting if Turkey booked their ticket. The large Turkish diaspora in Germany never needs an excuse to display their passion for football and, if their boys are one of the lucky qualifiers, the Crescent Star fans will be present in huge numbers. They effectively will be playing at home and will even have a German prowling the technical area in the shape of former Germany Under-21 boss Stefan Kuntz.

Fan fest...Euro 2024 will see a return of fan parks in host cities

Venues

FRANKFURT

Waldstadion (Eintracht Frankfurt)
Capacity: 54,697

HAMBURG

Volksparkstadion (Hamburg)
Capacity: 52,245

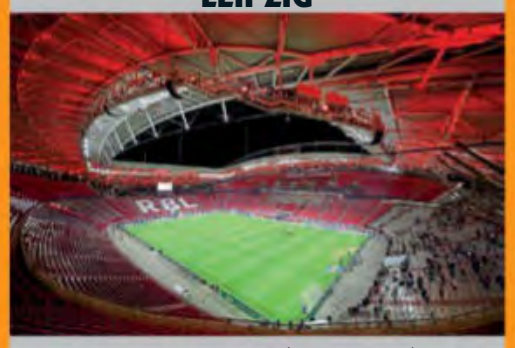
DUSSELDORF

Merkur Spiel-Arena (Fortuna Dusseldorf)
Capacity: 51,031

COLOGNE

RheinEnergieStadion (Cologne)
Capacity: 49,827

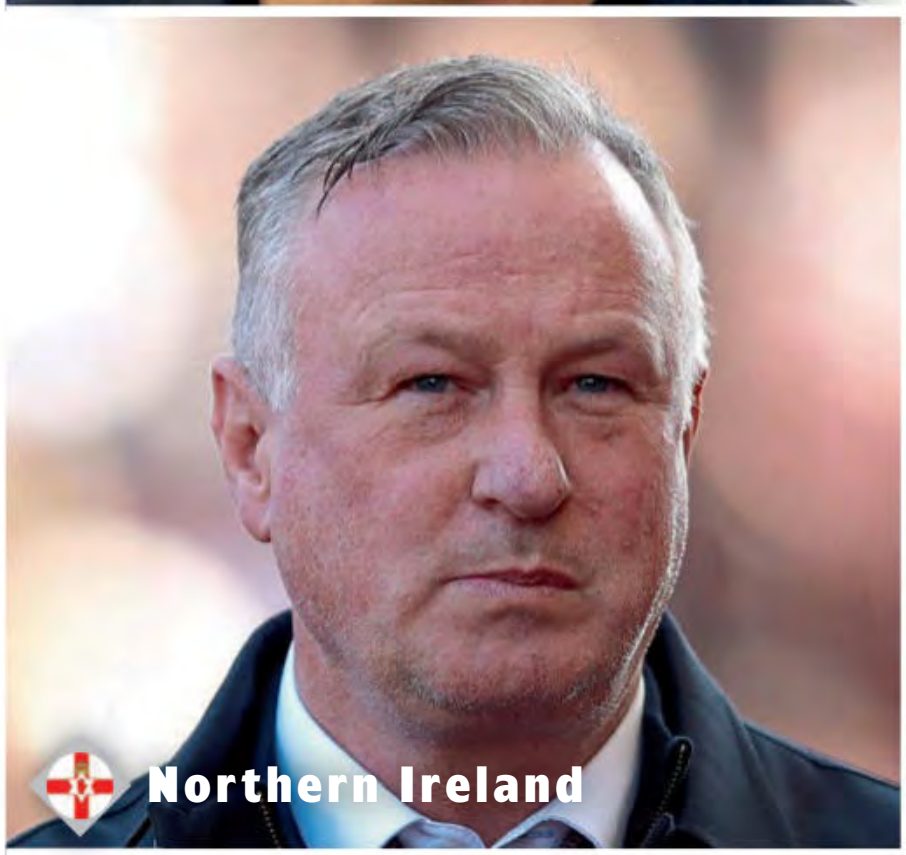
LEIPZIG



Red Bull Arena (RB Leipzig)
Capacity: 42,600

Belgium

Bosnia & Herzegovina


Northern Ireland

Malta

Armenia

Spain

Netherlands

NEW FACES

Ten European countries will head into March's Euro 2024 qualifiers with new coaches at the helm

Albania

PORTUGAL
Roberto Martinez

"I want to thank the president of the Portuguese Federation (FPF). He said I was not his first choice; I was his only choice!" Those were the words of Jose Mourinho, the man *not* appointed Portugal's new coach, just days after Roberto Martinez had been unveiled, signing a four-year contract with the *Selecao*.

Even before Mourinho's typically mischievous remarks, it was an open secret that the Roma coach had been the top target of FPF head Fernando Gomes, but he could not be coaxed away from the Italian capital. Even so, with Portuguese managers in vogue around Europe and several available such as Andre Villas-Boas, Nuno Espirito Santo and Paulo Sousa, opting for a foreign manager came as a big surprise.

The appointment of Martinez is an attempt to adopt a new direction. Fernando Santos, Portugal's longest-serving manager, enjoyed considerable success, yet was fiercely criticised in the latter part of his tenure for being overly conservative, intransigent and failing to get the most out of the enviable array of attacking talent at his disposal.

Martinez's football philosophy is front-footed. Whether or not he achieved all he could with Belgium is open to debate, but his commitment to attacking football was borne out in the displays of the Red Devils. A free-scoring team, several years at the top of FIFA's world rankings and an impressive 70 per cent win rate no doubt weighed heavily in the decision.

"I'm very excited to be with one of the most talented nations in the world," said Martinez. "When I received the invitation it was a project that really motivated me. Portugal must always aim to win as a modern team, with tactical flexibility. Can we become European or world champions? We have to take it one step at a time, but you have to dream big."

Tom Kundert

Poland

Portugal

SPAIN
Luis de la Fuente

"No one knows the present and future of Spanish football better than me," Luis de la Fuente said. It was just six days after Spain had been knocked out of the World Cup by Morocco, the players all home again as the competition continued without them, and already the coach Luis Enrique had been released. De la Fuente was his replacement. There were plenty of people who had doubts about whether he was the best man for the job, but he wasn't one of them.

The change had happened quicker than anticipated, and the way it unfolded wasn't as expected. "I thought I would at least have to make a decision," Luis Enrique admitted. Out of contract and resisting overtures to renew, it always felt likely he would walk away. When it came to it, the federation took that decision for him following disappointment in Qatar. And while there were a few other candidates, with the former Athletic Bilbao coach Marcelino the clearest of them, they decided to promote from within.

Asked a few days later about his claim that no one knows Spanish football better, De la Fuente said: "I wasn't trying to be presumptuous; I'm just telling the truth." A former full-back, he had no top-flight experience. The highest he reached was the second division with Alaves in 2011 and he lasted less that three months. But he had been Spain's Under-19 and then Under-21 coach, and had led the Under-23s at the Olympics – posts he had occupied since 2013. As he put it: he had been on top of Spain's best players for "the last ten generations." He knew the players he had to pick from.

Now he had been given the senior team for the first time. Well, actually the second. Just before Euro 2020, the Spain senior squad had to go into isolation because of COVID so De la Fuente's Under-21s played the final warm-up game for them, officially a full international against Lithuania in Leganes. They won 4-0.

Sid Lowe

NETHERLANDS
Ronald Koeman

At the presentation for his second spell as the Netherlands' national team coach, Ronald Koeman made it perfectly clear that he would not be copying Louis van Gaal's defensive approach that was seen at the World Cup: "I watched moments during matches thinking: 'This can be different, this must be different'.

"In the Netherlands we try to play – and that is often the most difficult path – good, attractive, attacking football," he added.

Koeman prefers to continue with the methods of his first spell in charge of the national team between 2018 and 2020, which means no more 5-3-2 and a return to 4-3-3, and the return of players like Jasper Cillessen in goal and midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum.

That is no surprise. The former Barcelona coach, who won 78 caps for his country and was a key player in the Netherlands' only trophy win back in 1988 at the European Championship, was first appointed after the national team had hit rock bottom by failing to qualify for two consecutive tournaments – Euro 2016 and the 2018 World Cup. Under his reign and with players like Virgil van Dijk, Frenkie de Jong and Memphis Depay at his disposal, the team were on the road to revival. He led them to the finals of the first-ever UEFA Nations League in 2019 – overcoming England after extra-time in the semi-finals before losing 1-0 to Portugal in the final – and returned the team to tournament action by qualifying for Euro 2020.

Yet when the tournament was postponed by a year due to COVID and Barcelona came calling, Koeman couldn't resist.

Now he is back and, after two very difficult years at the Camp Nou that inevitably led to his exit, he has a point to prove; especially since he inherits a side from Van Gaal that has not lost a game (in 90 minutes) in 20 outings. "I have to demonstrate that I can be successful at a major tournament," he said.

With the Nations League finals and Euro qualifier against World Cup finalists France coming up, now is the time for him to show it.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

Fresh appointments... Ronald Koeman and Luis de la Fuente at January's Nations League finals draw

Winning record... Luis de la Fuente guided Spain's U21s to the 2019 European Championship

POLAND
Fernando Santos

The last Poland coach, Czeslaw Michniewicz, was in the hot seat for less than a year, but fulfilled all the tasks set before him: qualifying for the World Cup, avoiding relegation from the Nations League's top division, and then taking the team to its first World Cup knockout round since 1986.

Yet despite all this, Qatar was regarded as a failure due to the perceived "poor style of play", with domestic media insisting that the team "must play more offensively".

Michniewicz's contract was not renewed and, in January, Santos was announced as his replacement. Polish FA chairman Cezary Kulesza was praised for recruiting "such a well known and experienced coach", who won Euro 2016 and the 2018-19 Nations League with Portugal. At the official presentation, he declared: "From today I am a Pole," and emphasised his focus on winning.

The appointment is somewhat at odds with the criticisms of Michniewicz, given that Santos was also accused of playing a defensive style that didn't make the best of his outstanding attacking players. Qualifying for Euro 2024 out of a group containing the Czech Republic, Albania, Moldova and the Faroe Islands is recognised as his "obligation", with Poland also expected to play more offensively. Will he be able to meet expectations?

Dariusz Kurowski

BELGIUM
Domenico Tedesco

In 2016, Roberto Martinez had a simple but attractive sales pitch for the Belgian FA: with this national team, they could become world champions. Yet the Spaniard did not quite deliver and his successor Domenico Tedesco, 37, arrives with lower ambitions.

It's the consequence of a different reality around the national team, one that won a bronze medal at the 2018 World Cup in Russia with barnstorming football, but then badly failed at both Euro 2020 and in Qatar, as the golden generation exited through the back door.

The recently-retired Eden Hazard was among those heavily criticised, but Tedesco has said that merit and quality will prevail in his squad selection and not age. He is not ready to let go of the veterans just yet. The Italian-German is a member of the laptop generation of coaches, who use data and metrics to shape their analysis of the game. Having coached Schalke, Spartak Moscow and RB Leipzig, where he won the German Cup, he professes a modern, energetic style of play.

His task is to lead Belgium to Euro 2024 while integrating the next generation. He will be assisted by new technical director Frank Vercauteren, a veteran of the Belgian game, who perhaps lacks the innovative ingenuity to maintain Belgium's spot at the top. It does at least end the unpalatable situation of Martinez holding the roles of both national team coach and technical director. Arsenal legend Thierry Henry, briefly linked with taking the top job, has also departed the backroom staff.

Tedesco's tenure begins with a Euro 2024 qualifier in Sweden.

Samindra Kunti

Partnership...Tedesco watches a domestic league game alongside new technical director Frank Vercauteren

Big expectations...Polish Football Association president Cezary Kulesza welcomes Fernando Santos to the fold

ALBANIA
Sylvinho

Albania's appointment of the former Brazil left-back ended a run of three Italian coaches, who brought with them a defensive style. While that approach did take them to Euro 2016 – their first-ever major tournament – the desire now is for a more adventurous approach with a talented group of young players. Euro 2024 is the target for Sylvinho, who will be assisted by his old Brazil team-mate Doriva and former Manchester City right-back Pablo Zabaleta.

ARMENIA
Oleksandr Petrakov

Last year, Petrakov was in charge of his home country Ukraine, and departed the role after June's World Cup play-off defeat to Wales. In their 31-year history, the closest Armenia have come to a tournament was with record scorer Henrikh Mkhitaryan. No such talent is available to Petrakov, who spent ten years working with Ukraine's youth teams, winning the Under-20 World Cup in 2019, and his focus is likely to be on preparing Armenia's next generation.

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA
Faruk Hadzibegic

In 1999, Hadzibegic took charge of Bosnia & Herzegovina for seven matches, failing to qualify for Euro 2000, but returns now with vast experience. His last international job was with Montenegro, but he was sacked after they finished bottom of their Euro 2020 qualifying group. Bosnia & Herzegovina have reached the play-offs for the last three Euros, but have never qualified for the finals.

MALTA
Michele Marcolini

Ranked 52nd out of 55 UEFA nations ahead of the draw, qualifying for Euro 2024 is a distant dream for Malta and their new coach. Marcolini has spent his entire career in Italy, which will be helpful if the Maltese FA succeed in its attempts to field a team in Serie C. That was a pre-COVID proposal of ambitious MFA president Bjorn Vassallo, who has appointed Marcolini to oversee a long-term project.

NORTHERN IRELAND
Michael O'Neill

Northern Ireland's most successful manager since the 1980s returns after leaving in 2020 to take charge of Stoke City. His replacement, Ian Baraclough, only won four out of 22 competitive games after being promoted from the Under-21s, and was sacked in October. Rekindling the magic of his first spell, when he led the team to Euro 2016, will be difficult, but O'Neill is committed, signing a five-and-a-half-year contract.

End of an era...Belgium disappointingly bowed out of the World Cup

RED DEVILS REBUILD

After a disastrous World Cup signalled the end of Belgium's "golden generation", a new era begins

Words: James Kelly

Belgium's home kit for the 2022 World Cup was certainly a clever idea by adidas. Opting for the traditional red body and black sleeves, the most striking aspect was the flame detail adorning the cuffs. Unfortunately, rather than signifying the heat Belgium would bring to the tournament, it proved the perfect uniform to symbolise the burning out of their "golden generation".

It is undeniable that Belgium's time in Qatar was nothing short of disastrous. A narrow win over Canada in the opening game was followed by a deserved 2-0 defeat to the plucky Moroccans, with exit confirmed in a spirited but ultimately drab goalless draw against Croatia.

Rumours swirled of arguments within the team. Romelu Lukaku was clearly not fit. Kevin De Bruyne declared pre-tournament they had no chance of glory as the squad was ageing. Then, less than a week after being dumped out, Eden Hazard announced his international retirement, with many feeling the waning star no longer warranted a starting place anyway.

While coach Roberto Martinez dismissed De Bruyne's comments, the Spaniard swiftly exited his role with the Red Devils, resigning after six-and-a-half years in the job.

Martinez was largely ridiculed for asserting that whilst not securing a trophy, he had "built a real legacy" by finishing third at the 2018 finals, topping the FIFA Men's World Ranking, opening a new training centre and equipping the vast majority of the squad with UEFA A-licences they can put to use post-retirement.

Football is ultimately about victory, but when viewed through a different lens Martinez's words begin to have more substance.

Spin the clock back 15 years, and Belgium were ranked 71st in the world – below the likes of Albania, Burkina Faso, Uzbekistan and Venezuela. In attempting to qualify for Euro 2008, they finished fourth, drawing home and away with Kazakhstan, and failing to beat Finland.

This situation was largely a result of the Bosman ruling and the subsequent easing of foreign player restrictions across Europe, which led to an exodus of the Belgian league's best players to richer divisions. As a result, some clubs completely closed down their youth academies, seeing it as futile to train prospects who would simply just go abroad for nominal fees.

How Belgium recovered is a question that no one can universally agree on. The most popular narrative is that after an embarrassing group-stage exit at Euro 2000 – co-hosted with the Netherlands – the Royal Belgian Football Association (RBFA) went back to the drawing board to re-establish a new blueprint for grassroots coaching and youth development.

Wing wizard... Jeremy Doku is highly rated

New arrival... Domenico Tedesco watches a Belgian league match

Rangy midfielder ...Amadou Onana has impressed for Everton this season

Others, however, claim that the RBFA deserves no credit whatsoever, instead placing heavy emphasis on the advanced academy programmes of the likes of Anderlecht, Genk and Standard Liege, while the importance of larger numbers of players being developed at academies overseas – especially in France and the Netherlands – is also stressed.

Some simply put the existence of the golden team down to chance and coincidence; a rare case of an outstanding crop of talent emerging within the same generation. Returning to the present day, the focus now is on what succeeds it.

The development Martinez refers to, Proximus Basecamp – partially a result of him serving from 2018 as RBFA technical director alongside his head coaching duties – is undeniably a state-of-the-art facility.

Located in Tubize, some 25km southwest of Brussels, the RBFA are now headquartered on the same site as the bespoke national training centre. All Belgian international sides are based here, men's and women's, plus both the Francophone and Flemish regional FAs and the country's national refereeing body.

As a sign of progress, when Dick Advocaat became Belgium manager in 2009, he walked into his office to find a communal water machine. The final resting place of that device is unknown; however, the fountain of youth shows no sign of evaporating within Belgian football.

The Red Devils have qualified for the Under-21 European Championship in Romania and Georgia this summer, where they will be looking to better their group-stage exit in 2019. Meanwhile the Under-17s are now regular participants in their age equivalent competition.

Despite many of the old guard nearing their end, exciting Belgian prospects continue to surface.

While Anderlecht are enduring one of their worst seasons since returning to the top flight in 1935, the consistent performances of 19-year-old centre-back Zeno Debast were enough to earn him a Qatar call-up by Martinez. The same was true of Lens striker Lois Openda.

In the Premier League, leggy 21-year-old midfielder Amadou Onana has impressed in a struggling Everton side and is now heavily linked with a big-money summer move. Dropping down to the Championship, Vincent Kompany's title-chasing Burnley have recruited eight players from the Pro League, including two Belgians: 21-year-old defender Ameen Al Dakhil and winger Manuel Benson.

Back in Belgium, league leaders Genk – who have previously produced Koen Casteels and Thibaut Courtois – boast an excellent sweeper-keeper in their current number one, 20-year-old Maarten Vandevoordt. In the same side is Mike Tresor, a 23-year-old attacking midfielder who has led the league's assist charts all season, notching 16 from his first 26 matches.

With Martinez now having taken over Portugal, the vast majority of his former squad were keen for his assistant Thierry Henry to take the reigns. Yet reportedly the Arsenal legend did not apply for the job, which instead went to Domenico Tedesco.

Fittingly for a man who claimed that he found out about the vacancy while at the dentist, reading the reaction from some quarters has been as pleasurable as pulling teeth.

As if to add weight to De Bruyne's age argument, the 37-year-old coach is less than two years older than defender Jan Vertonghen, who stated upon his appointment that he did not know who Tedesco was.

Meanwhile former Belgium coach Marc Wilmots, who led the Red Devils from 2012-16, has warned the newcomer that he "won't have time to prepare his matches as he does at the club".

> "In recent weeks I have been watching the Jupiler Pro League. I have to say that I see a lot of young talent"
>
> **Belgium's new coach Domenico Tedesco**

A true "laptop coach", Tedesco also does not fit the job description outlined by the RBFA in their advert. Listed online in December and predictably receiving many joke applicants, the job outline called for a candidate with "international experience at top level" and a "serial winner." The fact that this is Tedesco's first taste of international football and that he has only won one trophy in his career – the German Cup with RB Leipzig in 2022 – suggests that they haven't got their ideal man.

Tedesco has previously coached the youth teams of Stuttgart and Hoffenheim, moving into the senior game with Erzgebirge Aue and then onto Schalke and Spartak Moscow. His latest club tenure at Leipzig ended in September 2022 after a poor start to the current season.

However, for someone still so young, Tedesco's CV boasts a Bundesliga runners-up place with Schalke, and Europa League semi-final at Leipzig last term. He has a history of setting up intense, attack-minded sides that unleash young players – Christopher Nkunku last season being one such example.

A holder of a bachelor's degree in business engineering, what reportedly won RBFA officials over was a presentation Tedesco gave at the interview stage. In it he outlined 40 promising Belgian players, detailing their strengths and weaknesses, and how he intended to integrate them into the international fold.

"In recent weeks I have been watching the Jupiler Pro League [Belgium's top flight]. I have to say that I see a lot of young talent," he stated at his opening news conference in February. "It takes courage on the part of the clubs to play these youngsters as starters, they are very interesting."

Alongside his commitment to building from within, another plus Tedesco possesses is his diverse background. In decades gone, Belgium were frequently undermined by media outlets, split by language across the country, whipping up a case for or against coaches largely depending on whether they were Flemish or Francophone.

It was felt Martinez rose above this regionalism by being Spanish. Having been born in Calabria to Italian parents and moved to southwest Germany aged two, the dual-national Tedesco should enjoy a similar pass.

Furthermore, he has gone on record to state that his chosen language of working will be English, the language the RBFA conducts all meetings in and the main intention behind their 2019 rebrand.

Playing personnel aside, the most pressing issue for Tedesco is how to organise them. At both Schalke and Leipzig he tasted great success with a back three, but with centre-back being one of Belgium's weakest areas it remains to be seen how Tedesco decides to play his hand.

Certainly he appears open-minded, remarking that he will adapt to his players and produce a solution further down the line. With a contract running beyond the 2024 European Championship, Tedesco will clearly be given time to find his feet.

Handed a favourable qualifying group consisting of Austria, Azerbaijan, Estonia and Sweden – and with the top two qualifying automatically – it is likely that Belgium will reach their sixth international finals in a row with ease. Yet reaching Germany is only part of the challenge; Tedesco's task is to ignite a new era of Red Devils from the ashes of Belgium's golden generation.

James Kelly is the author of Golden: Why Belgian Football is More Than One Generation

Rising star... Lois Openda celebrates his first Belgium goal

BELGIUM'S NEXT GENERATION

Charles DE KETELAERE
Milan (Ita), *Forward*
Age: 22 Caps:11 Goals:1

Johan BAKAYOKO
PSV (Ned), *Winger*
Age:19 Caps: 0 Goals: 0

Amadou ONANA
Everton (Eng), *Midfielder*
Age: 21 Caps: 4 Goals: 0

Zeno DEBAST
Anderlecht, *Defender*
Age:19 Caps: 3 Goals: 0

Orel MANGALA
Nottingham Forest (Eng), *Midfielder*
Age: 24 Caps: 2 Goals: 0

Jeremy DOKU
Rennes (Fra), *Winger*
Age: 20 Caps:12 Goals: 2

Lois OPENDA
Lens (Fra), *Forward*
Age: 23 Caps: 6 Goals: 2

Maarten VANDEVOORDT
Genk, *Goalkeeper*
Age: 21 Caps: 0 Goals: 0

Wout FAES
Leicester City (Eng), *Defender*
Age: 24 Caps:1 Goals: 0

Arthur THEATE
Rennes (Fra), *Defender*
Age: 22 Caps: 4 Goals: 0

Alexis SAELEMAEKERS
Milan (Ita), *Winger*
Age: 23 Caps: 9 Goals:1

Albert SAMBI LOKONGA
Crystal Palace (Eng), *Midfielder*
Age: 23 Caps:1 Goals: 0

Yari VERSCHAEREN
Anderlecht, *Midfielder*
Age: 21 Caps: 7 Goals:1

FIFA Congress... Infantino speaking in Doha last year

ANOTHER FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT

Gianni Infantino has proposed a new series of international friendly tournaments. What would they look like? When would they run? Who would benefit? **Steve Menary** investigates…

After last year's World Cup finished, FIFA's ebullient president Gianni Infantino unexpectedly floated a wish list of new competitions that would give his organisation a higher profile and more control. Without any consultation, Infantino created headlines with plans for an expanded Club World Cup, but what gained less attention was a proposal for a FIFA World Series of four-team friendly tournaments.

"We will now consult on all of these topics and then elaborate on all the details," Infantino said at a news conference after the 37-member FIFA Council agreed on "strategic principles" for new competitions.

Details remain scarce. The World Series will be staged every March before major championships in even-numbered years and pit countries from different confederations against each other.

In the past, countries from different confederations have appeared as guests in other tournaments. CONMEBOL's Copa America has comprised all ten of the confederation's members plus two guests since 1993, when Mexico and the USA took part. Mexico and Costa Rica – both Spanish-speaking countries – have appeared regularly and six CONCACAF teams appeared in the centennial Copa America staged in the USA in 2016. Guests from outside the Americas have been scarce. Japan appeared in 1999 and returned 20 years later along with Qatar. The 2021 event was restricted to CONMEBOL members, but next year's event will see six CONCACAF guests as part of a strategic partnership agreed in January between the two confederations.

The 2024 CONCACAF Women's Gold Cup will also include four guests from CONMEBOL, while the two confederations are creating a new club competition to include the top clubs from each region.

CONCACAF president Victor Montagliani is a key ally of Infantino, while CONMEBOL president Alejandro Dominguez said: "We are determined to renew and expand our joint initiatives and projects. We want this passion to translate into more and better competitions."

CONCACAF's Gold Cup has featured Brazil and Colombia on three occasions, while Peru and Ecuador have also appeared once apiece. These invites have often been tied to hosting of FIFA's World Cup with South Korea playing in the Gold Cup in 2000 and 2002, and South Africa in 2005.

In 2020, CONCACAF also agreed a deal for 2022 World Cup hosts Qatar to appear in the Gold Cup in 2021 and again next year.

The confederation that has been consistently – and strangely – absent from both the Copa America and the Gold Cup is UEFA.

The European confederation did sign a renewed and extended Memorandum of Understanding with CONMEBOL that included the "potential organisation of a variety of football events". UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin commented: "We are very much looking forward to explore new opportunities together."

The first event was the Finalissima between the European champions and the Copa America winners with Argentina trouncing Italy 3-0 in the maiden event at London's Wembley Stadium last summer – an occasion that will be repeated by the women on April 6 when England face Brazil.

UEFA and CONMEBOL have worked together in the past on the Artemio Franchi Trophy and the Intercontinental Cup, but all these agreements are directly between confederations and bypass FIFA.

Finalissima... Argentina thrashed Italy at Wembley last summer

What the World Series will do is give FIFA skin in this game of cross-pollination between confederations. But many questions remain, particularly around finances.

In the women's game, four-team friendly tournaments are a common sight. This year for example, England's Lionesses faced South Korea, Italy and Belgium in the Arnold Clark Cup, named after the competition's sponsors.

Attracting sufficient funding for an equivalent competition in the men's game would be more challenging. Big South American teams like Brazil and Argentina are generally paid to play friendlies: in 2010, Argentina were paid $2 million by an agency to play a game with Brazil in Qatar, while the same year Brazil were reportedly paid $2.5m to play a game in Tanzania. If this level of teams were to be invited, significant compensation would surely be required from FIFA to secure acceptance.

And who would host the event? Surely one of the four teams that were invited – to generate crowds, at least. However, if the idea is for countries from different confederations to get the opportunity to play each other outside of World Cups, how will they be invited? And if there is only one country per

New proposals... Gianni Infantino speaks during the World Cup

confederation, who misses out?

UEFA has been consistently absent from the list of invitees at CONMEBOL and CONCACAF events, while Oceania only really has one member capable of competing at the highest level and that is New Zealand.

The old Confederations Cup included the champions from all six regions and was staged in the country due to host the next World Cup, but was scrapped after the 2017 event in Russia.

The Finalissima and the various agreements between CONCACAF and CONMEBOL give the top countries some chances to play each other, but would FIFA want to invite nations that are unlikely to play at a World Cup? If so, then Tahiti's madcap participation at the 2013 Confederations Cup in Brazil will surely linger in FIFA's memory.

Knowing his team had virtually no chance of getting a result against Nigeria, Spain or Uruguay, Tahiti coach Eddy Etaeta – who had led the Pacific islanders to a shock OFC Nations Cup win the previous year to qualify – decided that simply scoring a goal was the only objective.

That led to some big scorelines as defending was ignored. Jonathan Tehau netted in the opener against Nigeria but Etaeta was not satisfied and incredibly his team could be seen attacking in waves against Spain despite heading for a 10-0 defeat.

Such mismatches would surely not be part of FIFA's gameplan, so would invites be extended on merit, or to countries within the same band on FIFA's world rankings to ensure competitive matches?

> "Who is asking for these competitions? It's not the fans and certainly not the players"
>
> **Nicholas MacGowan von Holstein, Match IQ**

A handful of smaller countries have managed to play countries from other confederations. San Marino, who languish at the bottom of FIFA's rankings, entertained the Seychelles last September then journeyed to the Caribbean in November for a two-match tour of Saint Lucia, but sadly failed to win any of these games.

European teams have played fewer friendlies since UEFA introduced the Nations League in 2018. One reason for the Nations League's creation was to stop European teams being tempted by private operators into playing friendlies in neutral locations that could then be open to corruption.

CONCACAF took up the Nations League concept, ironically, to get smaller countries playing more often, and this ended the adventures of St Kitts & Nevis, who had played in Andorra, Estonia, Georgia and India between 2015 and 2018 under Mexican manager Jacques Passy.

The exploits of St Kitts & Nevis and San Marino are increasingly rare and smaller nations would surely welcome the chance to take part, particularly if FIFA is covering all of their expenses. But larger countries that know their commercial value in friendlies would be unlikely to be attracted.

Also, there is scheduling. Reports on when the World Series could start have varied from 2024 to 2026, but CONCACAF's Nations League finals are scheduled for March in both 2024 and 2025, which would rule out their top four teams.

Nicholas MacGowan von Holstein, managing director of match agents Match IQ, says: "I can see, say, a meeting between the champions of Europe and CONCACAF and it's funded by the federations, but it needs to be a one-off game and a highlight. Already this plan involves at least two games.

"Trying to squeeze this into the FIFA friendly calendar would not be easy so there would be conflict. It seems more about cementing positions of power and giving associations additional games. The priority however, should be the fans and the players, whom we should protect from too many games. We also need to consider the effect it has on the clubs, who ultimately pay the wages of these players."

World Soccer asked CONCACAF and the other five confederations – the Confederation of African Football, the Asian Football Confederation, CONMEBOL, UEFA and the Oceania Football Confederation – about the World Series. The responses were telling.

"This was FIFA's announcement and is their proposed competition, so it wouldn't be for us to comment on their plans," said a CONCACAF spokesperson, while a UEFA spokesperson said: "We kindly ask you to contact FIFA about this matter."

A CAF spokesperson replied similarly, saying: "I would recommend that you send this enquiry to FIFA – as I'm afraid I cannot be of use. They can best explain the concept and your questions."

Instead of coming up with a proposal, consulting with the confederations, and then making an announcement, it appears Infantino used the World Cup to blurt out an ill-thought out idea as he looks to consolidate his power at the head of FIFA.

Questions to FIFA about the World Series from *World Soccer* did not even raise an acknowledgement. It is understood a format is still being thrashed out and the response could be interesting.

"I always wonder how [FIFA] go about it," says MacGowan von Holstein. "It seems like the FAs are not being consulted on it or really know about it and you wonder who is asking for these competitions? It's not the fans and certainly not the players.

"There is an over saturation in the market and these competitions could have the effect that fans become tired of all the various formats. We need to be careful not to lose the core, which always has to be the fans."

Only FIFA – or perhaps only Infantino – have any idea how the World Series of Friendlies would play out but, given the world body's recent activities, then politics and money will surely be at the centre of their plans.

Intercontinental...the 2016 CONMEBOL Copa America featured a number of CONCACAF teams

'So much hope, so much excitement... all just shattered'

Thirty years ago, Zambian football was devastated by tragedy

Words: Mark Gleeson

It was a matter of minutes after take-off that the plane lost power and plummeted into the sea, exploding on impact and instantly killing everyone on board.

A Zambian air force DHC-Buffalo transporter had stopped at Libreville in Gabon to refuel. It was carrying the country's national team to Dakar for a key World Cup qualifier against Senegal. Eighteen players, two coaches, three support staff and five air force crew all died on April 27, 1993, and three decades on it remains a jarring tragedy with key questions still to be answered.

Why did Zambian authorities allow their team to fly on a plane that had been out of service for months and found to have several defects when tested just days before being used to transport the team? Was the pilot suffering from fatigue, having flown the team the previous day from another qualifier in Mauritius? Why did the engine catch fire on take-off and was the wrong engine turned off as a result, cutting all power and causing the plane to drop out of the sky?

It took ten years for civil aviation authorities in Gabon to conclude their investigation and produce a report, allowing time to fuel rumours, conjecture and conspiracy theories, and prolonging the suffering of the families of the dead.

Thirty years on Zambia have yet to issue any formal report of their own, with exhausted families still wanting answers but having long given up hope of receiving them.

This was a team of enormous potential, credible contenders for a World Cup berth in the United States in 1994 and seen as potentially future African champions too.

Zambian football was on the march, having stunned the world by beating Italy 4-0 at the Olympics in Seoul five years earlier. In those days there was no age limit for the tournament as there is today; countries outside of Europe and South America sent their full national teams to the Games while European and South American sides could not field players who had competed at a World Cup.

It made for a strong tournament and Zambia's stunning victory over the *Azzurri* in Gwangju was a breakthrough for the African game. Kalusha Bwalya, who scored a hat-trick, was voted African Footballer of the Year in 1988 on the

Tragedy...Zambia captain Kalusha Bwalya at the graves of his team-mates

back of that achievement.

Players from that squad were still integral to the side five years on in 1993 as they were drawn with Morocco and Senegal in a three-team group from which the winner would advance to the World Cup finals.

At 33 years of age, goalkeeper Efford Chabala was at the height of his craft and rated among the best on the continent; defender Samuel Chomba was similarly experienced, with Wisdom Chansa the midfield pivot and Derby Makinka an exciting wide attacker.

After Seoul, the likes of young full-back John Soko, towering centre-back Robert Watiyakeni and explosive striker Kelvin Mutale had emerged as other important elements of the side.

They were all among the 18 players killed, along with coach Godfrey Chitalu and assistant Alex Chola, two legends of the Zambian game.

In an era before the designated windows for international football, fixtures were arranged haphazardly, and overseas-based players had the difficulty of juggling the tricky tug of war between club and country.

Kalusha Bwalya was the captain of the team, its talisman and one of the few Zambians based overseas, playing at PSV. He and Charles Musonda (at Anderlecht in Belgium), Stone Nyirenda (at Izegem in the Belgian lower leagues) and Johnson Bwalya (Bulle in Switzerland) were all due to fly directly from Europe to Dakar and join up with the team for their opening game in the final round of qualification.

Bwalya was at home in Eindhoven when the phone rang. He had his jogging shoes on and was planning to go out for a run, looking forward to travelling the next day and linking up with his team-mates.

He stood in shock as the caller from Zambia slowly broke the news. He did not want to believe any of it. But then he turned on CNN and there it was,

New era...Ian Porterfield address Zambia's players after taking over

Paying respects... Zambia fans visit the graves of the victims

confirmation that his team-mates had effectively been wiped out.

Instead of climbing on the plane to Dakar, he flew home to Lusaka to lead the mourning as Zambia was plunged into grief, an entire nation in tears as their heroes were buried on the fringes of Lusaka's Independence Stadium. Today a monument stands next to their graves.

"There are no words to describe the devastation," recalls Bwalya. "Our people didn't stop crying. There was so much hope, so much excitement, and it was all just shattered."

But the story of the Zambia plane tragedy is as much about the death of so much potential as it is about a miraculous recovery of the national team, and how quickly Zambian football bounced back from a calamitous disaster.

Zambia insisted on fulfilling its World Cup qualifying obligations and, two months after the crash, hosted Morocco. Denmark had offered training and coaching facilities as new players were called up to try and quickly assemble a new XI and three friendlies played against neighbouring Malawi in a warm-up effort. Freddie Mwila, a former international who had played in the North American Soccer League, was appointed coach.

There was not an empty seat in the house at the Independence Stadium as the fans high in the stands turned towards the fresh graves of the 18 players who had been killed and chanted their names one by one.

Morocco took an early lead but Bwalya equalised with his cultured left foot, sending a free-kick sailing over the wall and into the back of the net. Five minutes later the diminutive Johnson Bwalya (no relation) scored the winner and Zambia smiled again.

"The friends we had lost we had in our thoughts, and we gave such a wonderful performance for them," says Kalusha.

Although the team eventually failed to qualify for USA '94, they came within minutes of a place at the tournament, beaten controversially in Casablanca in their final group match. Kalusha Bwalya had been the engineer of their recovery, stepping regally in his role as the elder statesman of the side.

"After the crash everyone thought we should stop and maybe forget about a national team for a few years," he recalls. "But it was the president of the country, [Frederick] Chiluba, who phoned me and said: 'We need to go on.'"

Less than a year after the air crash, Zambia were in the final of the Africa Cup of Nations tournament in Tunisia, propelled into the deciding tie against Nigeria by the inspiring form of their skipper.

"I just simply used my experience and made sure we looked ahead while at the same time not forgetting those who had gone. It is difficult to explain how we did so well in Tunisia."

But Zambia certainly captured the imagination. Pele, who watched the final and was introduced to both teams before the match, said his heart was "green" in a reference to Zambia's playing colours, and even the most hard-core Nigeria fan had to admire the achievement of their opponents.

Ian Porterfield, the Scotsman who had won the FA Cup for Second Division Sunderland in 1973, had taken over as coach one month before the tournament and played a major role in their quick revival, as they brushed aside the Ivory Coast in the group stage and thumped Mali 4-0 in the semi-final. Elijah Litana scored early against Nigeria in the final but, in the end, they lost 2-1.

In 2012 – nearly two decades on from the crash – Zambia finally won their first African title. Fittingly, Bwalya was present at the final as president of the Zambian Football Association, and watched on as a Didier Drogba-led Ivory Coast was defeated on penalties after a 0-0 draw. That the final was won in Libreville, the Gabonese capital, was decidedly poignant.

A few days earlier the team had gone to the beach closest to where the plane had come down and tossed wreaths out to sea, saying prayers and evoking emotions that would carry them to the Cup of Nations crown.

This was a team of enormous potential, credible contenders for a World Cup berth in the United States in 1994 and seen as potentially future African champions too

AFCON victors... Kalusha Bwalya holds the 2012 Africa Cup of Nations trophy

THE PLAYERS LOST

Patrick Banda	*(Striker)*
Efford Chabala	*(Goalkeeper)*
Whiteson Changwe	*(Defender)*
Wisdom Chansa	*(Midfielder)*
Moses Chikwalakwala	*(Midfielder)*
Samuel Chomba	*(Defender)*
Godfrey Kangwa	*(Midfielder)*
Derby Makinka	*(Midfielder)*
Moses Masuwa	*(Striker)*
Eston Mulenga	*(Defender)*
Winter Mumba	*(Defender)*
Kelvin Mutale	*(Striker)*
Richard Mwanza	*(Goalkeeper)*
Numba Mwila	*(Midfielder)*
Timothy Mwitwa	*(Striker)*
Kenan Simambe	*(Striker)*
John Soko	*(Defender)*
Robert Watiyakeni	*(Defender)*

PEDRO GONCALVES

"Our ambition is to qualify for all the major tournaments"

Since taking charge of the Southwest African nation in 2019, Angola coach Pedro Goncalves has been at the heart of their revival

You have made a remarkable ascent from youth coach at Sporting's academy to Angola's national team coach in a short space of time. How did that come about?
At Sporting in 2015, we received a visit from the president of the Angolan club Primeiro Agosto, who came to look at the facilities. I was in the gym at the time and he came in, took some pictures, and then we started a conversation about what he was doing there. He had been looking at academies across Europe to build one for his club in Luanda. The next day I was invited to meet him and within weeks I had accepted a job there; when you've been in the same job for 14 years, you need another challenge.

I went to Luanda with a few colleagues from Sporting and built up the academy, and after three seasons had put together a good project. I felt I'd done my job and it was time to go home. But the federation asked me to stay on and put together an Under-17 team for the World Cup qualifiers. That was really a job for three months but we won our regional tournament and then we went to the African championship, and from there we qualified for the 2019 Under-17 World Cup in Brazil. That was not an opportunity to be missed, so I ended up staying.

Then I took charge of the Under-23 side for the Olympic Games and, when the previous national team coach left, they asked me to help them again, initially just for the first qualifiers for Qatar. I took the job with 15 days to go before our opening match against Gambia but we won and then I was offered the job full-time. It was nothing that I had planned for but things happen.

Angola qualified for their one and only World Cup appearance in 2006, but there has been a major drop off since then...
There was not a good atmosphere in the team when I took over and a lot of players I called up didn't want to play. But I felt it was an opportunity to begin something. We've had many setbacks, but I feel we've now started to make progress and are closer to achieving the high level of the past. After almost four years in the job it's also an emotional attachment, because I feel that something belongs to me and I belong to it and that we can offer the Angolan people something again.

So what are your objectives and what progress have you made?
I started the job looking at it in two phases: one, to convince the foreign-based players to play even though we have no money to offer them. I felt I needed to convince them with the work, with commitment, with heart and with passion for the country. I also used the possibility of qualifying for the World Cup as motivation, plus the chance to help build a new side with the experience of the older players and bringing in many of the exciting youngsters. I'm happy with the response because we were honest with them from the start, made no false promises and just convinced them to try to help make the country stronger.

Then we had a lot of problems with the federation. There was no leadership for seven months while elections were being contested in court and FIFA cut their funding. But now that's settled and I feel there is commitment from everybody. We've had to cross many barriers but, step-by-step, we are growing. Now our ambition is to qualify for all the major tournaments. We have a solid base and if we get to the finals, then I think we can start thinking about winning tournaments and beating the big countries on the continent. But we're nowhere near that right now.

Are your next two Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers against Ghana a litmus test, an opportunity to see exactly where you are?
Sure, and it'll give the opportunity for the players to develop themselves. In the last 14 matches we've only lost once, and that was absolutely an unfair decision by the referee. Even when we have lost I've always felt we had a chance to win. Ghana, for sure, is a big challenge. They are the group favourites, one of the five Africans nations that played at the World Cup in Qatar and are strong, but our mentality is that we like that challenge with the better teams. And we have a good chance to qualify for the Cup of Nations – we are leading the group with them. It will be hard to beat Ghana but it will be hard for them to beat us too.

And how have the boys from that Under-17 World Cup developed?
That tournament changed the way players from Angola were viewed. I remember there was a time when my colleagues at academies in Portugal did not want to look at Angola players. They were only interested in stronger and more physical players from Cameroon, Nigeria or Senegal. But after that World Cup there was a lot of demand. Now there are four or five who have gone on to the national team and had a chance to play abroad. It is important for their development to get a club in Europe.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Lacatoni
F.A.F.

PIA SUNDHAGE

"England are very different today… this will be a great learning lesson"

Ahead of the Women's Finalissima between the European and South American champions, Brazil's head coach sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss her team

As a player you won the European Championship in England in 1984, and as a coach you won Olympic Gold in England in 2012. Do you consider England to be your lucky country?
I would say football is my lucky sport, more so. The best sport of all. But yes, I was very excited to go to Wembley Stadium in 2012 with the United States national team. That was a very exciting time for me and for women's football. It was great.

At the European Championship in 1984 you were the top scorer and player of the tournament. It remains Sweden's only major international title – was the final your best day as a player?
I think so. In later years, the coach changed my position. All the way up to 1984 I was a forward, then the women's game grew. I was lucky, the coaches put me in different positions and I had a chance to learn the game in a broader way: from a forward, to midfielder, to wing player and then actually as a sweeper. In 1984, there was a lot of goalscoring, of course. I think that was one of my best years.

How was that European title received when you returned home to Sweden? Did the media make you and your team-mates feel like champions?
Back then, we didn't have a lot of press at all. Even if we had someone coming up with a camera or whatever, we were excited! I remember in the newspapers, there were some great pictures that showed happy players and how we were so pleased with Ulf Lyfors, the head coach, and how we were grateful because that was the first recognised championship and we felt special. But everything, compared to things that are happening today, was nothing, absolutely nothing! I can't even remember a press conference – I remember a big party, that's for sure, to celebrate the gold medal.

You also scored at the old Wembley Stadium – the first-ever goal scored there in a full women's international – ahead of a men's game between England and Chile in 1989. What do you remember about that day?
It was a long time ago. If you say Wembley, it doesn't matter where you come from, it's something special. I remember we went to the stadium and we couldn't use the correct locker rooms. The women's players were absolutely nothing compared to the "real" football. I also remember we were not allowed to practise on the field before the game. But it was a little bit of a statement, the fact that we got the chance to play at Wembley. It's really hard to describe how it was back then compared to what is happening right now. Everything now is so much more professional – you talk about the press, the players, the quality of the games, how we travelled – but one thing that never changed is our big heart. The players, coaches and the people around the game, they have a big heart and they really want to improve the game. What drives you, I think, is that same thing I have today that we had in the good old days when it all started.

More recently, at the London Olympics, you coached the United States to victory at Wembley in front of over 80,000 people. As a student of the game, did you feel the history of the stadium and want to take in everything on the night? ➤

CBF
BRASIL
COPA AMERICA
Partido
19
ZONA 1 y 2
COPA AMERICA
Pia Marlene
SUNDHAGE
DELEGACIONES
ALL
1
2
3
4
7

Lucky stadium...Sundhage won Olympic Gold at Wembley Stadium in 2012 with the United States

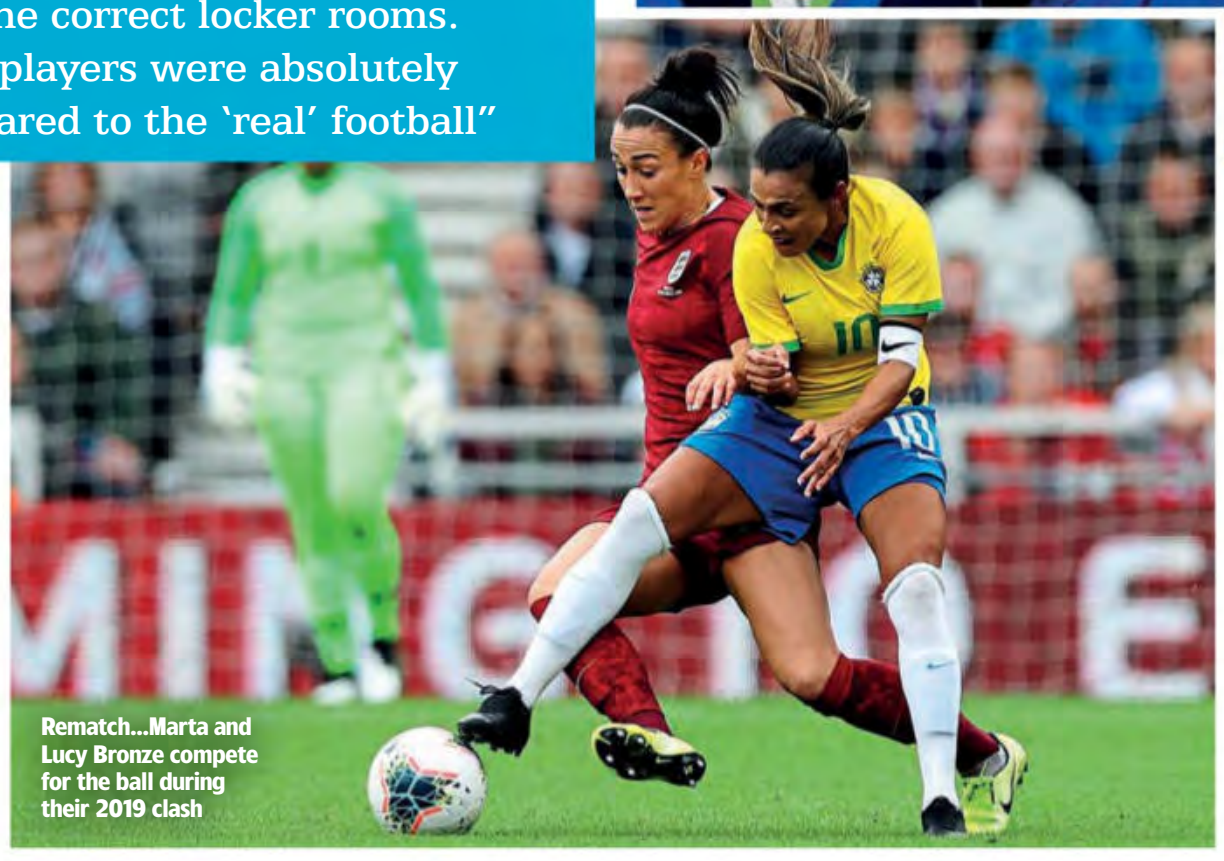
Absolutely, that I really recall. I was surrounded by great players. For sure, that is something special in my heart. It's almost like a landmark in your life. I also remember staying in the Olympic Village and getting a chance to watch the men's final. I remember walking around and thinking: "The United States is the best team in the world." I really felt that. That is something I will always remember.

In April, you will be returning to Wembley for the Finalissima against England and Sarina Wiegman, whom you faced once before as a coach when her Netherlands team defeated Sweden at Euro 2017.
After the game, she came to me, shook my hand and said: "I've been following your coaching," and I thought, I will probably follow you in the future because she's been really successful. I think that's pretty cool actually to get a chance to come to England with a new team, new players, new staff and to play her.

Both you and Sarina were nominated for The Best FIFA Women's Coach, the first time all the nominees have been female. As a former player, do you think female coaches are better able to understand what female players require or was that shortlist just a coincidence?
It's not about gender, it's about the person. For people as old as I am, we've been through all this, where you couldn't use the locker room, we didn't have coaches, nobody cared if you played or whatever. All of us have been a part of the game so I think it's more about their experience than the gender.

Looking at your Brazilian side, your captain at the Copa America, Rafaelle, is now playing in England. Have you noticed any changes to her game since she joined Arsenal?
Unfortunately she's been injured too much, but I can hear and read between the lines that she really likes it and she thinks it's a good journey she can take – she's previously been in China, for instance. I think this is a great way someone can improve their game. I really hope the games she is playing for Arsenal will help the Brazilian national team. Depending on where you are playing, the culture is different, the coaching style is different, the game is different and I think that's a big advantage for us.

> "We went to the stadium and we couldn't use the correct locker rooms. The women's players were absolutely nothing compared to the 'real' football"



Rematch...Marta and Lucy Bronze compete for the ball during their 2019 clash

One player that does have experience of playing at Wembley and in Europe is Marta. She hasn't played for you since last year but do you believe she is now motivated to play this summer at what would be her sixth World Cup finals?
Marta is motivated, no doubt about that! If you talk about a player that is competitive and has

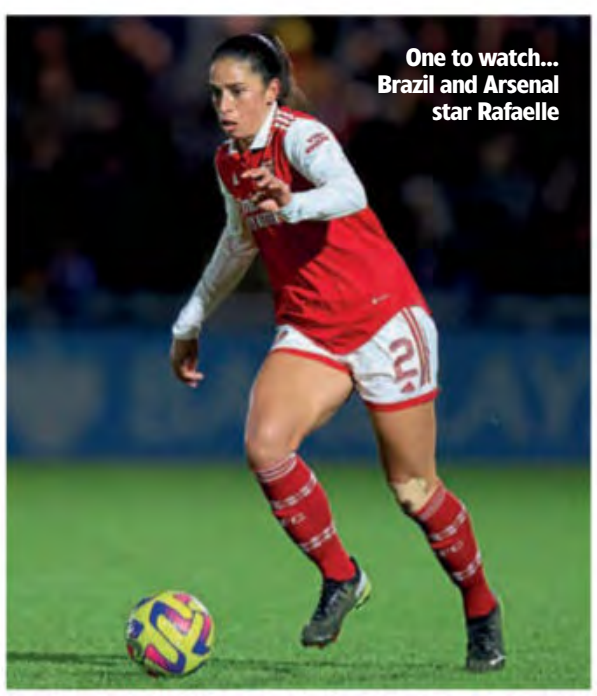
Champion... Sundhage celebrates with her players after last summer's Copa America victory

the grit or whatever else, she's motivated. She really wants to play at the World Cup. It would be cool, to be honest. I've been around some great players. If I look back, players like Abby Wambach, Carli Lloyd, Hope Solo, then with Sweden, Lotta Schelin and Caroline Seger. As a coach, being around good players, stars, it's so contagious. All of those players I've mentioned, and there are more of them – Maren Meinert, I just have to mention her, I coached her when I was at Boston Breakers – all of these players are teaching me and inspiring me. Now I have Marta and I really hope that she is good enough to play in the World Cup this year.

You've faced England on so many occasions as a player and a coach, but is this side different and can you see a way to defeat them at Wembley?
Oh, it's very different. At the beginning of my time with Brazil we played against England and we won 2-1 [in 2019 at Middlesbrough]. That was a tough game but I think England are very different today. If you look at the speed of play, the flexibility when it comes to the formation and how organised all the teams are now when it comes to the transition. I'm fascinated how fast it's getting right now. Just look at the UEFA Women's Euro final between England and Germany, I think that's one of the best games I've seen lately, even compared to the World Cup. It will be tough for us and that's inspiring. You have to find a winning way, you need to do a little bit better, tweak the attack and defending. This will be a great learning lesson for us going into the World Cup.

The Finalissima will be the first opportunity Brazil has had to win an international title since the passing of Pele. Living in the country, can you just explain what he means to the people there and your players?
It's impossible. I don't have English or even Swedish words for that to explain how much he meant, and still means, for this country. When we talk about football, then Brazil and Pele, it's different – there's another level. The whole country in one way was mourning. You could actually touch the feelings. He will always be remembered as a goalscorer and a very smart player, technically. As a winner he gave Brazil confidence. It was a unique feeling, for sure.

Interview by Asif Burhan


One to watch... Brazil and Arsenal star Rafaelle

Glenn Moore

The NWSL's biggest wish

As the National Women's Soccer League launches its 11th season there is one aim above all: a scandal-free year

Two years of ugly, painful revelations about the abusive coaching culture that operated in the NWSL's shadows have horrified supporters and sponsors, brought down a raft of coaches, including previously lauded names, and forced administrative change.

Hoping for an end to the scandals may be wishful thinking. Already this year, championship-winning Portland Thorns have fired assistant coach Sophie Clough and athletic trainer Pierre Soubrier.

Clough was found to have made "inappropriate and unwanted physical contact" with a player, "kissing her neck at the team's championship celebration", while Soubrier was axed for administering a medication containing codeine – a controlled substance – to two players, one "without her informed consent". The husband of star player Crystal Dunn, Soubrier now faces an inquiry by state regulators.

In addition, it was revealed that Kris Ward, who led Washington Spirit to the 2021 title, was found to have engaged in "verbal abuse and emotional misconduct," including "racial stereotyping". He will be unable to work in the NWSL again without completing mandatory training.

And the NWSL is just the tip of the iceberg. Last year's investigation headed by former deputy US attorney general Sally Q Yates, stated the league's abuse was "rooted in a deeper culture in women's soccer, beginning in youth leagues, that normalizes verbally abusive coaching and blurs boundaries between coaches and players."

It seems inevitable more horror stories will emerge from lower down as players feel increasingly empowered to report conduct they previously felt powerless to resist.

There are, though, shafts of light. Despite everything, the league attracts investors. Salt Lake City, Utah, whose franchise returned to Kansas in 2021 after the previous owner was implicated in an earlier scandal, is pencilled in to return in 2024. A 14th club will also debut next year with San Francisco the front-runners ahead of Boston and Tampa. Expansion fees now run at $40-50 million (Utah's, agreed in 2020, is less than $5m).

Encouraging the candidates is the impact made in 2022 by new franchises San Diego Wave and the Los Angeles-based Angel City. Wave drew 32,000 for the Californian derby between the pair, a new league record. Casey Stoney's team also came third in the regular season, a highest-ever finish for an expansion side.

Angel City failed to make the play-offs but had the league's highest average attendance, 19,105, selling out their 22,000-capacity stadium four times.

> The NWSL is just the tip of the iceberg…it seems inevitable more horror stories will emerge from lower down as players feel increasingly empowered to report conduct they previously felt powerless to resist

There are other positive indicators. Spirit will now play all matches at the 20,000-capacity home of MLS club D.C. United, while Kansas City Current are building what they believe will be the world's first purpose-built women's soccer stadium. Due to open next March, the $117m 11,500-seater venue sits on the Missouri riverfront.

Protect our players... NWSL has been hit by a number of scandals

Current are making waves on the pitch too with the most eye-catching pre-season signings. Classy Swedish defender Hanna Glas has been lured from Bayern Munich and will team up with Brazil star Debinha. Arguably the NWSL's most reliable performer, the midfielder eschewed offers from Europe to move west after exercising her new rights as a free agent to leave Courage.

Free agency was part of a deal between the players union and the league that allowed players with six years' NWSL service to determine their own futures – one of the oddities of US sport to the rest of the world is that players can be traded to a new club without their input.

That was underlined when New Zealander Abby Erceg was traded by Courage – where she had been since 2017 – to Racing Louisville in exchange for US defender Emily Fox (with another US international, Carson Pickett, also leaving North Carolina).

Erceg, who has quit the national team, passing up the chance to play in a home-hosted World Cup to

Record-breaking... last season's clash between San Diego Wave and Angel City was watched by a record crowd

concentrate on her club career, said she was "shocked and disappointed".

Lynn Williams, who traded from Kansas to Gotham FC with two hours' notice while in New Zealand with the US team, echoed her, saying: "It was a shock, it wasn't on my radar".

The new season starts on March 25, with the deciding match on November 11, and it should be intriguing – not least as there are so many newish coaches.

Mark Parsons, a championship winner with Portland in 2017, has returned to Washington Spirit after a disappointing sojourn with the Netherlands. OL Reign's Laura Harvey and Angel City's Freya Coombe have also been around a while.

But, aside from a handful of matches for Sean Nahas at Courage in late 2021, all the other coaches took charge of their first NWSL match last year.

Oddly, with all this change, much of it forced by the abuse scandal, NWSL is left with three female coaches (Harvey, Coombe and Wave's Casey Stoney) out of the 12. There are even fewer Americans, just Chris Petrucelli at Chicago Red Stars and Nahas. Eight are English, though some have been in the US for many years, and there is a Swede (Louisville's Kim Bjorkegren) and a Spaniard (Juan Carlos Amoros newly in at Gotham).

But now, when it comes to NWSL coaches, it is not about nationality or gender, but character and behaviour.

Round-up

Debutants...Portugal celebrate their first-ever World Cup qualification

TRIO TO MAKE WC DEBUTS

Haiti, Panama and Portugal, all first-time finalists, clinched the last three places at the World Cup after navigating their way through the inter-confederation play-offs in Auckland and Hamilton.

In Group A Portugal beat Cameroon (who had earlier knocked out Thailand) with a 94th-minute penalty, converted by Benfica's Carole Costa, after Ajara Nchout's 89th-minute equaliser looked set to force extra-time.

Haiti were the surprise success in Group B, defeating Senegal 4-0 then beating Chile, who had Lyon's Christiane Endler in goal, 2-1. Teenager Melchie Dumornay, who herself joins Lyon from Reims in July, scored both goals.

Four teams were in Group C. In the semi-finals Paraguay sent Chinese Taipei home after a penalty shootout and Panama beat Papua New Guinea 2-0. Panama then edged out Paraguay in the final with a 75th-minute goal from Lineth Cedeno of Sampdoria.

CANADA STRIKE THREAT

Players from Canada, the Olympic champions, played the SheBelieves Cup "under protest" after initially threatening to strike. They relented after their federation, with whom there is an ongoing pay and conditions dispute, threatened legal action if they did not play. They subsequently came last in the four-team tournament.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE DRAW

Holders Lyon were drawn against Chelsea in the Champions League quarter-finals with a potential rematch of last year's final v Barcelona to follow.

Potential rematch...Lyon beat Barcelona in last season's final

Quarter-finals: March 21/22 & 28/29
PSG v Wolfsburg; Lyon v Chelsea; Bayern Munich v Arsenal; Roma v Barcelona
Semi-finals: April 22/23 & 29/30
PSG/Wolfsburg v B. Munich/Arsenal
Lyon/Chelsea v Roma/Barcelona

SAUDI SPONSORSHIP IRKS HOSTS

There was pushback from both host countries at leaked revelations that Saudi Arabia's tourist board would be a sponsor of the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. Neither federation had been consulted and they wrote jointly to FIFA to "clarify" the situation.

Former FIFA Council member and ex-Australia international Moya Dodd, wrote: "For FIFA to tell LGBTQ players and fans they should 'Visit Saudi' is to send them to a jurisdiction where they are regarded as criminals. FIFA would be selling them into persecution."

Critical... Moya Dodd

BUNDESLIGA BOOMING

Figures released by the German federation revealed all women's Bundesliga clubs still operate at a loss but revenue had increased 40 per cent for 2017-18 to 2021-22, during which season combined revenue for the 12 clubs was $18m. That figure is expected to grow sharply for 2022-23 with attendances up from 800 to 3,000.

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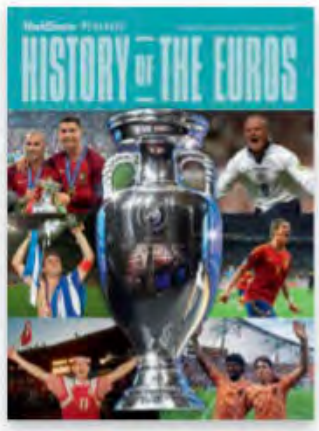

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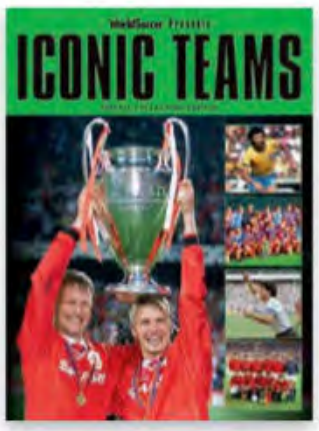

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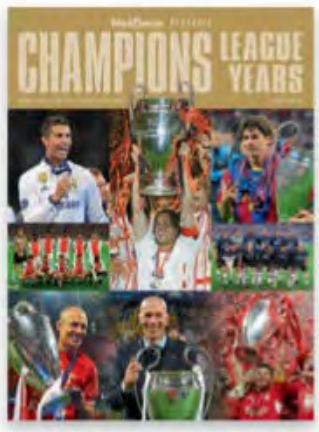

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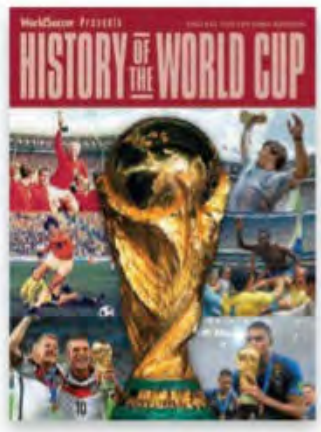

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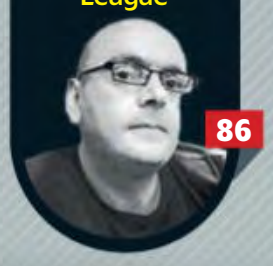

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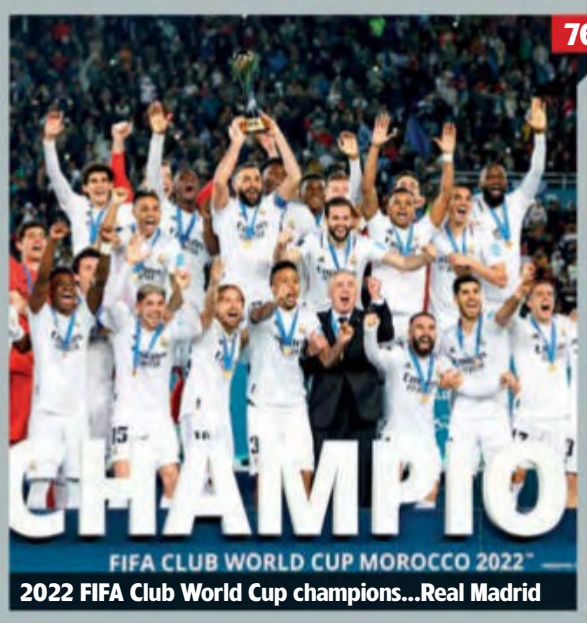

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2022 FIFA Club World Cup champions...Real Madrid

Club World Cup

SAMINDRA KUNTI

Madrid make it five

Same old story in FIFA's Club World Cup as European champions Real Madrid triumph in Morocco

Amid raucous Moroccan supporters revelling in the tricks of Vinicius Junior, the finesse of Federico Valverde and the goalscoring prowess of Karim Benzema, Spanish giants Real Madrid claimed a record fifth Club World Cup, adding to their three Intercontinental Cup trophies. They dispatched Asian champions Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia 5-3 in an entertaining final. At various stages in the match, the encounter should no longer have been a contest – 2-0, 3-1, 4-1 and 5-2 – but every time Al Hilal found a way to keep the match alive, exploiting Madrid's cavalier defending.

Even though his team never looked like losing control, Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti conceded that Al Hilal had shown "skills and quality" against his side.

"Europe is indeed very strong, but the other continents are getting closer to it," said the Italian.

For Real, the victory represented a welcome break from domestic malaise. For those outside the hectic bubble of European football, the Club World Cup remains a tournament of paramount importance, with all the participants having their own reasons to attach significance to their participation. The Seattle Sounders were the tournament's MLS debutants, becoming the first team from the United States to participate. They had earned the right by beating Pumas UNAM in the 2022 CONCACAF Champions League final, finally breaking Mexico's 16-year stranglehold on the competition.

In Morocco, the Sounders fell at the first hurdle against Egyptian giants Al Ahly, 1-0. The Sounders outshot their African opponents 12-9, but the goal came at the other end through a deflected volley from Mohamed Magdy Afsha. It was a heartbreaking, last-gasp exit for Seattle, but they demonstrated they had belonged among the other contenders, giving hope to the rest of MLS. "We make one little half a mistake, one little error, give the ball away in that part of the field, they hit the crossbar, we had a chance to clear it, it drops to [Magdy Afsha] and he shoots," reflected

World champions... Real Madrid players lift the trophy

Semi-final...Al Hilal's Salem Al Dawsari celebrates scoring against Flamengo

Seattle Sounders boss Brian Schmetzer. "Alex [Roldan] tries to block it and it goes in the goal. It's really unfortunate after all the effort the players put in."

That didn't apply to Flamengo, the Rio club that had travelled to conquer the world but instead left red-faced after a shocking 3-2 semi-final defeat to Al Hilal. Cue an inquest. Where did the result leave Brazilian football on the global stage? Did Flamengo's humiliating exit reinforce the narrative of a footballing nation in decline?

Brazil 1970 legend Gerson pointed to the substitutions of attackers Everton Ribeiro and Giorgian de Arrascaeta as the reasons for Flamengo's failure – without those two creative players the Rio club faltered when chasing the game. In his column for Brazilian newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo*, Tostao questioned whether Brazilian players had the emotional stability to weather these major matches.

Flamengo's braggadocio goes with the style and territory of the Gavea outfit: they have a fanbase of no fewer than 40 million supporters, something the club is increasingly monetising. Flamengo have never been wealthier, generating annual revenues of around 1 billion Reais (around £158 million). Having the deepest squad, the club won the Copa Libertadores and Copa do Brasil double in 2022, but a top-heavy team proved vulnerable against Al Hilal. There was no coming back from Salem Al Dawsari's opening goal from the penalty spot, and Gerson's sending off compounded Flamengo's problems. The club had paid over €15m to bring the midfielder back to Brazil from Marseille after moving to France in 2021.

> "Europe is indeed very strong, but the other continents are getting closer to it"
>
> Real Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti

On and off the pitch, Flamengo have never been in a better position and yet it has not translated into winning the Holy Grail that is the global crown. That also has to do with economic realities. The gap between European clubs' finances and the rest of the world has been clear for a while, and that inequality is mirrored in the results of this competition. Yet South America's champions could usually expect to at least make it to the final.

Now, with the rise of Saudi Arabia as a footballing power and the money that they are prepared to spend, that may no longer be the case.

Al Hilal enjoyed a landmark tournament as the first Saudi team to reach the Club World Cup final, and it fell to them to try and wrestle the title away from Europe. No Asian team has ever lifted the trophy, and the last time it went out of European hands was to Corinthians in 2012, so there was little surprise that it didn't work out for them.

As a number ten, Luciano Vietto provided a creative spark and striker Moussa Marega held up play well as target man. He should have gotten his team's fourth goal late on in the final, but even so the valiant performance was a statement from Saudi Arabia's biggest club, representing a country that is increasingly employing the global game as a reputation-laundering tool.

Visit Saudi and Neom, the futuristic yet-to-be-built city, were ubiquitous as sponsors in Morocco. Saudi Arabia have hopes of hosting the expanded Club World Cup in 2025, but for now will make do with hosting the next edition in its current guise in December 2023. The competition remains an incongruity in the football calendar, but at least the outcome is predictable: the rest of the world craves victory, but in the end Europe wins.

Award winners...the tournament's Golden, Silver and Bronze Ball winners: Vinicius Jr, Federico Valverde and Luciano Vietto

Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Euro 2024 qualifying

The road to the 2024 European Championship in Germany begins with some stellar clashes

What better way to raise the curtain on the Euro 2024 qualifying process than a pair of epic encounters on matchday one: England travelling to Naples for a potentially volcanic clash with Italy, and France hosting the Dutch in a heavyweight head-to-head at the Stade de France in Paris.

A perusal of the history books suggests that the Dutch will be up against it in the French capital. They have lost five of their last six matches against *Les Bleus* and have not won on Gallic soil for a whopping 87 years (a 6-1 win back in 1936).

For the French, fresh from achieving a commendable silver medal at the World Cup, the time has come for a changing of the guard in defence. Arguably the two most important individuals in their back line, goalkeeper and skipper Hugo Lloris and central defender Raphael Varane, both recently announced their retirement from international football; an unfortunate double whammy representing a considerable loss of experience with 238 caps between them.

Varane, aged just 29, had been touted in many quarters as the man most likely to succeed Lloris as captain. But Varane insists he has made the right decision, citing "physical and psychological wear and tear". The silver lining in this particular cloud for France is that they are incredibly well stocked at centre-back, with Bayern Munich's Dayot Upamecano, Ibrahima Konate of Liverpool and Arsenal star William Saliba all more than capable of taking up the slack.

Lloris' exit is much more of a problem for France boss Didier Deschamps. In normal circumstances, Milan's impressive Mike Maignan would step in between the posts. However he has been out for most of the season with a calf injury and even if he does return soon, his lack of match practice may render him a risky selection in the eyes of Deschamps.

Changing of the guard...France's Raphael Varane and Hugo Lloris have retired from international duty

With Lloris' back-up at Qatar 2022, Steve Mandanda of Rennes, also opting to hang up his national team boots, Deschamps may have to turn to West Ham United's Alphonse Areola, with Brice Samba of Lens or Nantes' Alban Lafont as wildcards.

Back for a second spell at the Netherlands helm, Ronald Koeman has made it clear that he will not be indulging in tactical continuity. Rather than retaining the 5-3-2 system often used by his predecessor Louis van Gaal, Koeman has indicated that his default shape will be a classic 4-3-3. Despite steering the *Oranje* to the last eight of World Cup 2022 and signing off with a 20-game unbeaten run (in regulation play), Van Gaal's stodgy, pedestrian approach had large swathes of the Dutch public and pundit community tearing out their hair. Koeman is proposing a far more adventurous, expressive style of play.

According to Koeman, a 5-3-2 system simply does not suit the Dutch players. "With [5-3-2] you often have a man more than you need at the back and thus are left short-handed in other areas," he argued at his inaugural press conference.

Gareth Southgate's England will be entering the lions' den when they step onto the field at the Maradona Stadium in Naples

It remains to be seen, though, whether Koeman will truly release the handbrake at the Stade de France. He may well conclude that the use of two out-and-out wingers against the French juggernaut is naive in the extreme. In his first match back in the *Oranje* driving seat, the former Barcelona and Everton boss will, above all, want to avoid defeat. Pragmatism may rule.

Possible new faces in the Dutch line-up include talented young PSV playmaker Xavi Simons and the Feyenoord trio, full-backs

Volcanic clash... England begin their campaign away to Italy

Back in the hot seat ...Ronald Koeman has taken charge of the Netherlands for the second time

Lutsharel Geertruida and Quilindschy Hartman and midfielder Mats Wieffer. In-form Newcastle United stopper Sven Botman is another who could force his way into consideration.

Gareth Southgate's England will be entering the lions' den when they step onto the field at the Maradona Stadium in Naples. Not only will the Three Lions have to deal with an overtly hostile white-hot atmosphere, they also have the complicated task of seeing off an Italian side with their backs to the wall. After the ignominy of failing to qualify for the last two World Cups, the *Azzurri* dare not slip up again

on the road to a major tournament. Their reputation as one of the world's most competitive nations has already taken a real battering. Never mind the European title they picked up at Wembley in 2021, a third wipe-out in five years would be akin to an acceptance of also-ran status. Expect the *Azzurri* to come out all guns blazing versus the English.

"When things don't go well, the most important thing is to pick yourself up and in this renewal, the contribution of youngsters will be fundamental," says Italy coach Roberto Mancini. Among the new-generation candidates are Juventus midfield pairing of Nicolo Fagioli and Fabio Miretti, West Ham's towering striker Gianluca Scamacca – though he has been sidelined of late with a knee injury – Leeds United's mini-marvel winger Wilfried Gnonto, Sassuolo target man Andrea Pinamonti and elegant Torino schemer Samuele Ricci.

Italy are in something of a tactical flux at the moment. Following the apocalyptic failure to qualify for Qatar 2022, Mancini apparently no longer regards the high-pressing 4-3-3 system that functioned so well at

Point to prove... Austria coach Ralf Rangnick with his players

England's golden boy... Jude Bellingham

Euro 2020 as the be-all and end-all. Experiments in shape have come thick and fast with varying results. While a switch to a 3-5-2 worked reasonably satisfactorily, the choice of a 3-4-3 proved a flop, the lack of mobile wing-backs producing only an imbalanced mess.

The *Azzurri* lined up in a 3-5-2 when beating England 1-0 in a Nations League tie in Milan last autumn and Roberto Mancini would sign right now for a similar outcome. Italy very much won the midfield battle that night, their excellent mid-press limiting the Three Lions to a meagre diet of sterile possession and next to no forward progression. Mancini is a particular fan of England golden boy Jude Bellingham and will want to cage in the Dortmund box-to-box starlet as much as possible.

England will have to be decidedly braver and more pro-active in this clash with the Italians. The time has come for manager Gareth Southgate to be less risk-averse, and a win in Italy would be a real feather in his cap. The Three Lions have not triumphed there since way back in 1961, when a side containing Bobby Charlton, Jimmy Greaves and Bobby Robson ran out 3-2 winners in a friendly in Rome.

Matchdays one and two will constitute highly significant early road tests for a number of new national team coaches. After a decade of successful work with various Spanish youth teams, Luis de la Fuente is now in charge of the seniors and will be aiming for maximum points from the visit of Norway and trip to Scotland. Meanwhile in Poland, Fernando Santos' top priority is to finally end the White-and-Reds' chronic inability to punch above their weight. Santos begins his latest mission with a tough away day in the Czech Republic and a home encounter with the underrated Albanians.

Ralf Rangnick has a reputation to salvage after his short-lived Manchester United spell, but is not off to the best start after taking charge of Austria last April

In Group F, Belgium have handed their destiny to former Schalke and RB Leipzig strategist Domenico Tedesco. Determined to disprove all those who believe that the Belgian Red Devils are a busted flush, Tedesco begins his reign with a complicated head-to-head in the backyard of the always well-drilled Swedes.

Elsewhere in Group F, Austria begin their first qualifying campaign under Ralf Rangnick. The 64-year-old has a reputation to salvage after his short-lived Manchester United spell, but is not off to the best start after taking charge last April. He only won one Nations League match as Austria were relegated from League A, and in November narrowly avoided an embarrassing 0-0 draw in a friendly with Andorra thanks to a late winner from Marko Arnautovic. Now that he's had almost a year at the helm, he will expect more from his team's Euro 2024 openers against Azerbaijan and Estonia.

As for newly-installed Portugal boss Roberto Martinez, he could not have wished for a kinder start. A home game with Liechtenstein and a trip to Luxembourg should be a formality for a side of Portugal's capabilities.

By way of contrast, the eternal over-achievers of Croatia will have to hit the ground running, sure to be extensively challenged when hosting Wales and travelling to Turkey.

Youth expert...Luis de la Fuente won the 2019 European U21 Championship

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Spain
- Scotland
- Norway
- Georgia
- Cyprus

GROUP B
- Netherlands
- France
- Republic of Ireland
- Greece
- Gibraltar

GROUP C
- Italy
- England
- Ukraine
- North Macedonia
- Malta

GROUP D
- Croatia
- Wales
- Armenia
- Turkey
- Latvia

GROUP E
- Poland
- Czech Republic
- Albania
- Faroe Islands
- Moldova

GROUP F
- Belgium
- Austria
- Sweden
- Azerbaijan
- Estonia

GROUP G
- Hungary
- Serbia
- Montenegro
- Bulgaria
- Lithuania

GROUP H
- Denmark
- Finland
- Slovenia
- Kazakhstan
- Northern Ireland
- San Marino

GROUP I
- Switzerland
- Israel
- Romania
- Kosovo
- Belarus
- Andorra

GROUP J
- Portugal
- Bosnia & Herzegovina
- Iceland
- Luxembourg
- Slovakia
- Liechtenstein

CONCACAF

STEVE MENARY

Nations League culmination

All of the region's heavyweights face the prospect of missing out on the finals

The final two rounds of the 2022-23 CONCACAF Nations League will see some exciting and decisive matches, particularly in League A, where three-team groups provide a fine line between qualification and relegation.

LEAGUE A

The four group winners qualify for the Nations League finals at the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles and also for this year's CONCACAF Gold Cup finals. The runners-up also qualify for the Gold Cup and the third-placed side go down. In most groups in League A, the sides going into the final round at the bottom look unlikely to survive.

The greatest excitement is in Group D. The USA were the only CONCACAF team to emerge from the group stage at the World Cup, but they enter the Nations League final round in danger of elimination.

Caretaker coach... USA's interim boss Anthony Hudson

Anthony Hudson has been brought in as interim head coach after Gregg Berhalter's contract was not renewed, but a debut defeat at home to Serbia in Los Angeles does not augur well.

Anything other than a victory in their game in Grenada on March 24 will pile the pressure on Hudson. Currently top of the group are El Salvador, and their head coach Hugo Perez – born in San Salvador but a 73-cap USA international – will relish the chance of an upset and can call on a swathe of players with experience of playing in the US, including captain Alex Roldan and record caps holder Darwin Ceren.

The crunch game in Group A sees Mexico host leaders Jamaica on March 26. Both are guaranteed qualification to the Gold Cup – as long as Suriname

Playing catch-up... Canada trail Honduras in League A Group C

Crunch match ...Mexico host Jamaica

don't upset Mexico in Paramaribo – with the victors in the finale taking the Nations League finals spot.

If Costa Rica manage at least a point away to Martinique on March 25, then Group B remains alive, and a clash three days later in San Juan against leaders Panama will decide the finals spot.

Canada had a tough World Cup, eliminated in the first round in Qatar despite exciting performances. John Herdman's rapidly-developing side need a result away to bottom-placed Curacao to keep their final game at home to Group C leaders Honduras alive.

LEAGUE B

The League B winners also qualify for the Gold Cup and the runners-up go into the 12-team preliminary round.

A win away to rock-bottom Barbados will keep Cuba in the driving seat in Group A ahead of their final game at home to second-placed Guadeloupe. Cuban qualification will send shivers through the US immigration service given the swathes of defections that have ensued after their previous participation in overseas football tournaments.

Group B has proved the most contentious after Bermuda were awarded a 3-0 walkover against Montserrat in June after the Caribbean island failed to show up. The decision provided Bermuda with their only win, but the British overseas territory can overtake second-placed Guyana for the Gold Cup preliminary round spot with a win when the two sides meet on March 25.

Guyana will have a second chance to claim second with a win at home to Montserrat three days later. CONCACAF will surely hope that plays out given grumblings in the South American country that could provoke an appeal if Bermuda finish second behind runaway leaders Haiti.

Group C could be decided when unbeaten leaders Nicaragua visit winless Saint Vincent & the Grenadines. Three points will see Nicaragua win the group, rendering their visit to ailing Caribbean giants Trinidad & Tobago a dead rubber. But, having beaten T&T 2-1 in Managua last June, the Central American side's much travelled Chilean coach Marco Antonio Figueroa would still fancy finishing the job in Port of Spain.

Group D should be decided on the final matchday too when second-placed Guatemala host leaders French Guiana. Like the other French territories in CONCACAF, French Guiana are not in FIFA and do not have the same power to force clubs to release players, but French coach Thierry De Neef has forged a formidable team featuring many local players.

LEAGUE C

At the bottom level, top spot brings promotion and a place in the Gold Cup preliminaries. Stern John has brought immediate success to Saint Lucia after moving from Anguilla last year and winning Group C, while veteran US coach Dave Sarachan's Puerto Rico were too strong for the Caymans and British Virgin Islands in Group D.

Bonaire can ensure promotion by avoiding defeat away to Sint Maarten in Group A. Aruba top Group B on goal difference ahead of a St Kitts & Nevis side whose best days are behind them. But the two meet in Basseterre on March 26 and home advantage and a game in hand should take St Kitts through.

> The USA were the only CONCACAF team to emerge from the group stage at the World Cup, but they enter the Nations League final round in danger of elimination

CURRENT STANDINGS

LEAGUE A

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Jamaica	3	1	2	0	+2	5
2	Mexico	2	1	1	0	+3	4
3	Suriname	3	0	1	2	-5	1

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Panama	3	2	1	0	+7	7
2	Costa Rica	2	1	0	1	0	3
3	Martinique	3	0	1	2	-7	1

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Honduras	3	2	0	1	+1	6
2	Canada	2	1	0	1	+3	3
3	Curacao	3	1	0	2	-4	3

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	El Salvador	3	1	2	0	+2	5
2	USA	2	1	1	0	+5	4
3	Grenada	3	0	1	2	-7	1

LEAGUE B

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Cuba	4	3	0	1	+6	9
2	Guadeloupe	4	3	0	1	+2	9
3	Antigua & Barbuda	4	2	0	2	-2	6
4	Barbados	4	0	0	4	-6	0

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Haiti	4	3	1	0	+11	10
2	Guyana	4	2	0	2	-8	6
3	Bermuda	4	1	1	2	+1	4
4	Montserrat	4	1	0	3	-4	3

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Nicaragua	4	3	1	0	+7	10
2	Trinidad & Tobago	4	3	0	1	+5	9
3	Bahamas	4	1	0	3	-6	3
4	St Vincent/Grenadines	4	0	1	3	-6	1

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	French Guiana	4	3	1	0	+4	10
2	Guatemala	4	2	1	1	+2	7
3	Dominican Republic	4	1	1	2	-1	4
4	Belize	4	0	1	3	-5	1

LEAGUE C

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Bonaire	4	3	1	0	+7	10
2	Sint Maarten	4	1	2	1	+4	5
3	US Virgin Islands	4	1	1	2	-3	4
4	Turks & Caicos	4	1	0	3	-8	3

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Aruba	3	1	1	1	+2	4
2	St Kitts & Nevis	2	1	1	0	+1	4
3	Saint Martin	3	0	2	1	-3	2

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Saint Lucia	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	Dominica	3	0	2	1	-1	2
3	Anguilla	3	0	2	1	-2	2

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Puerto Rico	2	2	0	0	+9	6
2	Cayman Islands	3	0	2	1	-3	2
3	British Virgin islands	3	0	2	1	-6	2

Africa

MARK GLEESON

AFCON qualifying update

Qualification for the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations in Ivory Coast continues

AFCON hosts ...Ivory Coast

A homecoming match for Morocco against Brazil is a fitting tribute to the country that reached the World Cup semi-finals in Qatar, but it also means that Africa's new top-ranked team will not play a competitive game again until mid-year.

The next two rounds of Africa Cup of Nations qualification at the end of March will feature 44 of the continent's national teams but not the Moroccans, who were due to play a double header against Zimbabwe in Group K but whose opponents are still banned by FIFA after their government closed down the football association amid allegations of corruption and sexual harassment. It has been more than a year of isolation now for Zimbabwe as the stand-off with FIFA continues.

Moroccan supporters have been itching for a homecoming opportunity to see their side in action, and the match against Brazil in Tangier on March 25 will be a massive party. Morocco have also fixed a friendly against Peru at Atletico Madrid's Metropolitano Stadium on March 28.

It means their next competitive game will be played almost seven months after their World Cup heroics, away against South Africa in their penultimate Cup of Nations qualifier. "The objective is to win the Cup of Nations in the Ivory Coast," said Morocco boss Walid Regragui last month. "We have to set high goals. We were a team that was too easily satisfied with reaching a quarter-final," he complained.

They should have little problem qualifying in what is now a three-team group, with Liberia and South Africa battling for the second qualifying place.

Ghana have unveiled Chris Hughton as their new head coach, moving from his role as an advisor at the World Cup to the youthful Otto Addo, who has returned to his work with the young players at Borussia Dortmund.

Hughton will have an easy transition in his new role, given he has worked extensively with all the players for the past year, but has a tricky debut home and away against Angola in Group E.

Tunisia's coach Jalel Kadri offered to resign after the World Cup, despite their group win over France, because Tunisia had failed to qualify for the second stage. But the Tunisia federation turned down his "request" and Kadri will remain in charge for back-to-back games against neighbours Libya. The Eagles of Carthage have qualified for an unprecedented 15 past Cup of Nations finals in a row.

Algeria have handed a new contract to head coach Djamel Belmadi, who took them to the 2019 Cup of Nations title but then saw his side flop in defence of their crown in 2021 in Cameroon, and blew World Cup qualification in extraordinary circumstances. Algeria should settle their place at the finals when they take on Niger in Group F.

> "The objective is to win the Cup of Nations in the Ivory Coast. We have to set high goals. We were a team that was too easily satisfied with reaching a quarter-final"
>
> Morocco coach Walid Regragui

High-profile Portuguese coaches are now at the helm of two heavyweight nations with Jose Peseiro expected by Nigeria fans to ensure his side demolish Guinea-Bissau in Group A while former Benfica boss Rui Vitoria takes charge of Egypt in their double header against Malawi in Group D.

UEFA Champions League runner-up Avram Grant is the new coach of Zambia, having previously been in charge of Ghana from 2014-17. His debut is home and away against tiny Lesotho where he will be expected to set the Zambians on their way to the finals after failing to qualify for the last three editions.

There has been consternation and criticism in the Democratic Republic of Congo after the country's main stadia failed inspections by CAF, who have banned a total of 22 countries from hosting matches.

The inspectors concluded that the Stade des Martyrs in Kinshasa and the Stade Kibassa Maliba in Lubumbashi were not up to standard and therefore cannot host their qualifier against Mauritania in Group I.

"How could such a mythical [Martyrs] stadium, which made so many generations of Congolese sportsmen dream, fall into such a state of abandonment?" asked Leopards winger Paul-Jose Mpoku. "However, nothing [is] surprising because the state of this stadium is like our football: we tinker, we patch up the facade but once we scratch a little... it's nothingness and desolation."

Also forced to move their home qualifiers to a neutral venue are Botswana, Guinea, Cape Verde and Rwanda, who have been allowed to host qualifiers in the World Cup over the last two years but have now also been deemed to have allowed their stadia to fall into a state that is no longer suitable for international competition.

Cameroon's showpiece Olembe Stadium was also removed from the list of approved venues. It was where eight people died in a stampede during the Cup of Nations finals in January last year and where the pitch broke up badly during the tournament.

Staying put... Tunisia boss Jalel Kadri

CURRENT STANDINGS

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Nigeria	2	2	0	0	+11	6
2	Guinea-Bissau	2	1	1	0	+4	4
3	Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Sao Tome e Principe	2	0	0	2	-14	0

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Burkina Faso	2	2	0	0	+4	6
2	Cape Verde	2	1	0	1	0	3
3	Eswatini	2	0	1	1	-2	1
4	Togo	2	0	1	1	-2	1

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Cameroon	1	1	0	0	+1	3
2	Burundi	2	0	1	1	-1	1
3	Namibia	1	0	1	0	0	1
4	*Kenya*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Ethiopia	2	1	0	1	+1	3
2	Malawi	2	1	0	1	0	3
3	Guinea	2	1	0	1	0	3
4	Egypt	2	1	0	1	-1	3

	Group E	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Ghana	2	1	1	0	+3	4
2	Angola	2	1	1	0	+1	4
3	Central African Rep	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Madagascar	2	0	1	1	-3	1

	Group F	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Algeria	2	2	0	0	+4	6
2	Niger	2	0	2	0	0	2
3	Tanzania	2	0	1	1	-2	1
4	Uganda	2	0	1	1	-2	1

	Group G	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Mali	2	2	0	0	+6	6
2	Congo	2	1	0	1	-3	3
3	Gambia	2	1	0	1	0	3
4	South Sudan	2	0	0	2	-3	0

	Group H	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Ivory Coast	2	1	1	0	+2	4
2	Zambia	2	1	0	1	-1	3
3	Comoros	2	1	0	1	+1	3
4	Lesotho	2	0	1	1	-2	1

	Group I	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Mauritania	2	1	1	0	+3	4
2	Gabon	2	1	1	0	+1	4
3	Sudan	2	1	0	1	-2	3
4	Congo DR	2	0	0	2	-2	0

	Group J	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Tunisia	2	1	1	0	+4	4
2	Equatorial Guinea	2	1	0	1	-2	3
3	Libya	2	1	0	1	-1	3
4	Botswana	2	0	1	1	-1	1

	Group K	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Morocco	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	South Africa	1	0	0	1	-1	0
3	Liberia	1	0	0	1	-2	0
4	*Zimbabwe*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*

	Group L	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Senegal	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	Mozambique	2	1	1	0	+1	4
3	Rwanda	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Benin	2	0	0	2	-3	0

AFC Champions League

JOHN DUERDEN

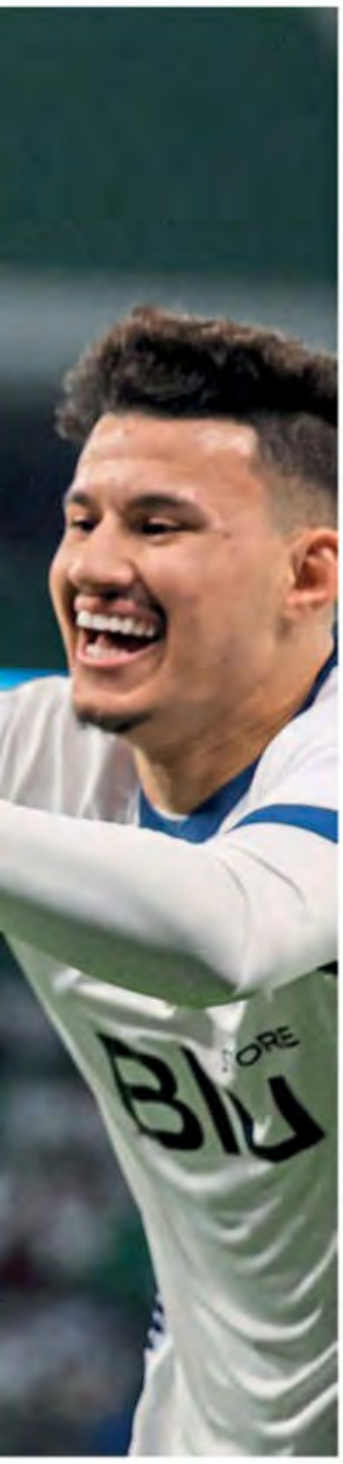
Al Hilal power into final

Saudi Arabia giants Al Hilal advance through the western zone to the Asian Champions League final after thrashing Al Duhail of Qatar

Going into the Asian Champions League semi-final between Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Al Duhail on February 26, most expected a tight affair. Al Hilal may have been defending champions and looking for a record fifth continental title up against semi-final rookies, but Al Duhail had Hernan Crespo at the helm, were top of the Qatar Stars League and were also playing on home soil.

Yet in the end, the clash could hardly have been more one-sided. Al Hilal ran out 7-0 winners, five goals up before the break, in one of the most stunning performances in the history of the

Thrashed... Al Duhail's first-ever Champions League semi-final was a disaster



Match winner...Odion Ighalo scored four goals v Al Duhail

tournament. Odion Ighalo scored four, two in each half, Moussa Marega got two and Salem Al Dawsari, Saudi Arabia's World Cup hero against Argentina in November, got the other.

The Riyadh team are a winning machine. Their 18 league titles and four Asian crowns are domestic and continental records. Earlier in February, they defeated African champions Wydad AC and South American champions Flamengo to get into the final of the FIFA Club World Cup. Losing 5-3 to Real Madrid was no disgrace. Winning by seven in Asia's semi-final shows that they are still the team to beat on the world's biggest continent.

Now the attention goes to the two-legged final in April and May where they will take on Urawa Reds of Japan, already qualified as the eastern zone (the tournament is divided into two geographic halves until the final) had finished its knockout stage months earlier.

The two teams know each other well. Urawa defeated Al Hilal in the final in 2017 to win their second continental championship. Two years later, the same teams met but the result was reversed, ending East Asian domination of the Champions League that had stretched back to 2006, a run punctuated only by Al Sadd of Qatar's 2011 triumph.

With 60,000 fans waiting at Saitama Stadium, just north of Tokyo, the first leg in Riyadh will be vital. As things stand, Al Hilal, who not only have foreign talent such as Ighalo and Marega but 12 members of Saudi Arabia's World Cup squad, are the favourites. But things change quickly in Asian football. By April, the Saudi Arabian league season will be approaching its climax and now, after commitments at the Club World Cup and in Asia, Hilal have a lot of games to catch up.

These are heady times for Saudi Arabian football and not so much for Qatar. After losing all three games at the World Cup on home soil, Al Duhail losing by seven was another blow for the country and coach Hernan Crespo.

"There is nothing to explain, everything was very clear," said Crespo, who took the job in September. "We faced a team that eliminated Flamengo and scored three goals against Real Madrid. This is the difference between a team that is in the semi-final for the first time and a team who have won the title before."

Seventh heaven...the stadium's scoreboard displays the stunning scoreline

Rematch...Al Hilal and Urawa Reds will meet in the final, a repeat of 2017 (pictured) and 2019

Al Duhail did, at least, prevent an all-Saudi Arabian semi-final by beating Al Shabab, another team from Riyadh, in the previous round. Al Shabab had been the most impressive team until the last eight, winning six and drawing one of their seven games, conceding just once. With plenty of firepower at the other end, scoring 20 goals up to the quarter-final stage, a first Asian title was in sight.

> **The clash could hardly have been more one-sided. Al Hilal ran out 7-0 winners, five goals up before the break, in one of the most stunning performances in the history of the tournament**

The game with Al Duhail was a game that could have gone either way and was ultimately a tale of two strikers. Brazilian forward Carlos has had a prolific season in front of goal and had a number of chances before injuring himself stretching for a cross early in the second half. Then the score was 0-0. Kenyan Michael Olunga, the tournament's top scorer last time around, had also missed chances before showing his class late in the game, first with a header and then with a fine finish to seal a 2-1 victory for Al Duhail.

If that quarter-final was always expected to be a tight one, most thought that Al Hilal would be much too strong for Foolad. The Iranians had squeezed past Al Faisaly, a second-tier Saudi Arabian team, 1-0 in the last 16 thanks to a Sasan Ansari goal, but no sooner had they won then head coach Javad Nekounam resigned, ending his four years in charge. The legendary former international midfielder who played over 150 times for Iran did not give a reason but could turn up in charge of the national team or a bigger club in the region.

Al Hilal had by far the most possession but the Iranians, well-organised by assistant Hamidreza Rajabi, had the better chances. In the end though, a late goal from Marega was enough to send Hilal through and they could well go all the way again.

CAF Champions League

MARK GLEESON

Erratic opening to groups

At the halfway point of the African Champions League group phase, last year's finalists face a battle to progress to the knockout rounds

Both Esperance of Tunisia and Morocco's Raja Casablanca produced a 100 per cent record at the halfway point of the group phase of the African Champions League, effectively already booking their berths in the last eight of the continent's top club competition with three matches still to play.

Mamelodi Sundowns were also looking odds on for yet another spot in the quarter-finals, but last season's two finalists – winners Wydad Casablanca and runners-up Al Ahly – are having to scramble after they both lost their opening group games.

The pair have a game in hand, however, after their opening weekend matches were both postponed due to their participation in the Club World Cup in Morocco.

Sacked...Mehdi Nafti lost his job with African Champions League holders Wydad

Thriller...Al Ahly and Mamelodi Sundowns played out an exciting 2-2 draw in Cairo

Wydad, after being eliminated by Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia at their own tournament, lost their first Group A game in the Champions League at JS Kabylie of Algeria just one month after Morocco refused to send their home-based national team to their neighbours for the African Nations Championship.

There was little fuss, however, about Wydad traveling to Algiers where they were beaten by a late goal from defender Badreddine Souyad, a forceful header from a corner.

Although Wydad then won a week later at home to Angolan champions Petro Atletico – that game's only goal coming from a first-half penalty from skipper and World Cup squad member Yahya Jabrane – it was not enough to save coach Mehdi Nafti's job.

The ex-Tunisia international midfielder is the second manager since Wydad gave up Walid Regragui to the Morocco national team last August. While Regragui went on to achieve heroics with Morocco in Qatar, Wydad decided to dispense with his successor Houcine Ammouta after only 11 games in charge. Nafti, formerly of Racing Santander, Birmingham City and Real Valladolid, arrived in January with coaching experience in Spain – most recently with Leganes and Levante – but the flop in the Club World Cup and the loss to JS Kabylie was enough to see Wydad's impatient and ruthless president Said Naciri fire him one day after beating Petro.

Group A, however, is still wide open with Wydad expected to get at least a top-two finish. They have now appointed Juan Carlos Garrido, whose previous tenure at the club in 2020 lasted six months.

Their neighbours Raja scored ten goals without reply in their three Group C games, with three from new signing Hamza Khabba. Their coach is Mondher Kebaier, who knows all about the insecurity of coaching on the North African circuit having been Tunisia boss up until two matches before they qualified for Qatar. Raja began with a 5-0 thrashing of Vipers, a harsh introduction to group play for the rookies from Uganda.

Like Raja, Esperance have not conceded a goal in the three wins that have taken them to the top of Group D. It included an away triumph at Chabab Belouizdad of Algeria and a 2-0 home victory over Zamalek in their third game, which also highlighted the turmoil at the Cairo club.

Zamalek have won the tournament five times, second only to compatriots Al Ahly's ten, but their last was in 2002. They went into this season's competition as Egyptian champions and with veteran Portuguese coach Jesualdo Ferreira in charge but have failed to deliver on expectation, held at home in a goalless draw by Sudan's Al Merrikh and losing to Belouizdad and Zamalek. No problem, reckoned an optimistic Ferreira after the 2-0 defeat at Esperance in round three: "There are still nine points to grab. We just finished the first half of the group stage and we haven't yet delivered our performance," said the 76-year-old.

Last season's two Champions League finalists – winners Wydad Casablanca and runners-up Al Ahly – are having to scramble after they both lost their opening group games

Al Ahly's form will also be a concern to Egyptian fans. After finishing fourth at the Club World Cup, they travelled to Sudan for their opening Group B game at Al Hilal and were beaten 1-0.

Egyptian clubs rarely lose to their southern neighbours from Sudan but the home team could even afford a penalty miss by Makabi Lilepo, who had opened the scoring just after half-time with a free-kick. It was a relatively soft effort from the DR Congo striker but a botch up by Al Ahly goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy allowed it to go in.

Al Ahly then had to come from behind to draw at home a week later with Mamelodi Sundowns in an exciting 2-2 draw. The South African champions had beaten Ahly in Cairo in last season's group stage and went a goal up through Namibia forward Peter Shalulile. Ahly then fought back to lead with efforts from Mohamed Abdelmonem and Hussein El Shahat, before Thapelo Morena snatched a late draw for Sundowns to move onto seven points at the head of the group.

The group stage will conclude in early April with the knockout stages due to commence later that month.

Upset...supporters of Sudanese club Al Hilal celebrate after shocking Egyptian giants Al Ahly

Uzbekistan

STEVE MENARY

Trailblazer

Striker Eldor Shomurodov could be the first of many Uzbekistan players to make his name in a major European league in the near future

Trailblazer... Uzbekistan striker Eldor Shomurodov in action for Spezia

When Eldor Shomurodov came on in the dying minutes of Roma's 2022 Europa Conference League final victory over Feyenoord, he became the first Uzbek to win a UEFA title.

The White Wolves striker, who averages a goal every other game at international level, blazed a trail for his countrymen when he joined Genoa in 2020 and was snapped up a year later by Roma for €17.5 million.

The only other Uzbek to play in Serie A was the little-known Ilyos Zeytulayev, who signed for Juventus in 2000 but failed to make a breakthrough and made most of his appearances in the second tier, often on loan. Now, after 34 Roma appearances but just three goals, Shomurodov is also out on loan albeit still in Serie A at Spezia.

Western European leagues have proved hard to break into for Uzbeks, despite their own Super League being amongst the strongest in Central Asia.

"In Europe, we don't get a chance to watch Uzbek football but it's a similar quality to Kazakhstan," says coach Nikola Lazarevic, who took an ageing Qizilqum Zarafshon team to fifth in the USL last season. "It's the best level in Central Asia and there are some well-organised clubs, but we cannot compete with the level of Saudi Arabia, South Korea or Qatar."

Top overseas players in the Uzbek league can attract more than $400,000 a year, while leading Uzbek players bring in half that. Playing abroad is an attraction and most Uzbeks initially head for Russia, which is unsurprising as the landlocked republic only gained independence in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Centre-half Rustam Ashurmatov plays at Rubin Kazan and midfielder Khojimat Erkinov at Torpedo Moscow, while Jaloliddin Masharipov and Azizjon Ganiev play in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates respectively.

The bulk of the national team come from a handful of domestic clubs, mainly Nasaf, AGMK and Pakhtakor Tashkent, who won their 15th league title in 2022. Attendances can be sparse. Runners-up Navbahor from Namangan averaged more than 15,000 in 2022 but across the league the average was only 3,500.

Overseas players and coaches feature heavily; Lazarevic was one of 25 Serbs playing or coaching in the USL last season. Clubs can field up to six legionnaires, who often come to Uzbekistan after failing to make the grade in Western Europe.

This is why no Uzbek club has won the Asian Champions League yet, although Qarshi-based Nasaf did win the second tier AFC Cup in 2011. Nasaf, Pakhtakor and their Tashkent rivals Bunyodkor have come close in the Champions League but not for over a decade, but the advent of a new licensing system in 2023 and privately-owned clubs could raise standards.

> Western European leagues have proved hard to break into for Uzbeks, despite their own Super League being amongst the strongest in Central Asia

Dilshod Ruzmetoff, the Ubzek Football Association's European representative, says private owners have "a great interest in competent management and transparency [and] the development of the academy and infrastructure of the football club."

Two USL clubs in 2023 will have private owners. Yaypan-based Turon have private investors and achieved promotion after beating Lokomotiv Tashkent in the 2022 relegation play-off last November. Surhan from Termez just avoided relegation last year but could be transformed under the ownership of oil business ERIELL. "I would not be surprised if FC Surhan in a couple of years will win the Champions League Cup of AFC," says Ruzmetoff.

That sort of achievement and a strong showing from Shomurodov at Spezia could have Western European clubs taking a closer at Uzbek players in the future.

Historic... Shomurodov came on for the dying moments of Roma's Europa Conference League final victory

MARCH 17-APRIL 14

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Women's UEFA Champions League

The quarter-finals of the Women's Champions League begins on Tuesday and Wednesday, March 21-22, with the second legs taking place a week later. Lyon v Chelsea is perhaps the standout clash, with the winners set to face Barcelona or Roma in the semi-finals. In the other half of the draw, Paris Saint-Germain take on Wolfsburg, while Bayern Munich face Arsenal.

Holders...Lyon won last season's trophy

Copa Libertadores

The 2023 Libertadores campaign begins in the spring, with the draw taking place on March 22 and the group stage kicking off on April 4. The title has gone to Brazil for the last four seasons – two each for Flamengo and Palmeiras – with the last three finals all-Brazilian affairs. These dates are mirrored for the Copa Sudamericana.

Crunch time in Europe

On Friday, March 17, the road to Europe's three elite club competitions will be mapped out as the quarter-final and semi-final draws are made for the UEFA Champions League, Europa League and Europa Conference League. The quarter-final first legs will all take place between April 11-13.

The road to Berlin

Qualifying for Euro 2024 begins at the end of March, with a number of eye-catching ties kicking things off. Euro 2020 finalists Italy and England go head-to-head in Naples, while Ronald Koeman's second stint as Netherlands coach begins in Paris against France. Wales and Scotland both face daunting tests, taking on Croatia and Spain respectively, while neighbours Montenegro and Serbia meet for only the third time in their history. Other standout fixtures include Sweden v Belgium, Georgia v Norway and England v Ukraine.

Stadio Diego Armando Maradona...the venue for Italy v England

Turn to page 97 for a full list of March's Euro 2024 qualifiers

5 unmissable matches

- **Barcelona v Real Madrid, March 19**
  The second of three *Clasicos* in the space of a month sees La Liga's biggest clubs meet in a top-of-the-table clash at the Camp Nou. The league meeting is sandwiched between the two legs of the Copa del Rey semi-final.
- **Lazio v Roma, March 19**
  Arguably the fiercest local rivalry in Italy, this year's *Derby della Capitale* is a vital clash in the race for the top four. Over the past five seasons, the two sides have only qualified for the Champions League once each.

***Derby della Capitale*...Lazio players celebrate after winning the last derby 1-0 in November**

- **Manchester City v Liverpool, April 1**
  This is the first of a season-defining run of fixtures for Jurgen Klopp's side, facing title rivals City and Arsenal, plus struggling Chelsea, in the space of ten days. By the end of this sequence, the destination of the Premier League title may well be decided.
- **Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund, April 1**
  This *Klassiker* could have serious consequences for the title race, with the two giants competing at the top of the Bundesliga. A week later, Dortmund face Union Berlin, another title contender.
- **England Women v Brazil Women, April 6**
  Almost a year after Argentina beat Italy 3-0 at Wembley in the first-ever men's Finalissima, the women take their turn as the champions of Europe and South America go head-to-head.

Domestic cup clashes

Early April sees Europe's big cup competitions reach crucial stages. The finalists for Spain's Copa del Rey and the Coupe de France are decided, it's the last eight of Germany's DFB-Pokal, while the Coppa Italia semi-final first legs (Juventus v Inter and Cremonese v Fiorentina) kick-off.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

JANUARY 2022

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	13
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	9
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	7
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	6
Yann Sommer (Bayern Munich)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	3
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Chelsea)	2
Diogo Costa (Porto)	2
David de Gea (Manchester United)	2
Alex Meret (Napoli)	2
Nick Pope (Newcastle United)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Ederson (Manchester City)	1
Rafal Gikiewicz (Augsburg)	1
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Rui Patricio (Roma)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Ajax)	1
Brice Samba (Lens)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1

DEFENDERS

Kim Min-jae (Napoli)	16
Joao Cancelo (Bayern Munich)	12
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	12
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	11
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	10
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	8
Josko Gvardiol (RB Leipzig)	8
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	7
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	7
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	6
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	6
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	5
Danilho Doekhi (Union Berlin)	5
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	5
William Saliba (Arsenal)	5
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	4
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	4
Mario Rui (Napoli)	4
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Oleksandr Zinchenko (Arsenal)	4
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	3
Danilo (Juventus)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Eric Dier (Tottenham)	3
Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United)	3
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	3
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	3
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	3
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Sven Botman (Newcastle United)	2
Sergino Dest (Milan)	2
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	2
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	2
Roger Ibanez (Roma)	2
Marquinhos (PSG)	2
Chancel Mbemba (Marseille)	2
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	2
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	2
Romain Saiss (Besiktas)	2
Fabian Schar (Newcastle United)	2
Nuno Tavares (Marseille)	2
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	2
Manuel Akanji (Manchester City)	1
Toby Alderweireld (Antwerp)	1
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	1
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	1
Rodrigo Becao (Udinese)	1
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Bremer (Juventus)	1
Dan Burn (Newcastle United)	1
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	1
Matthijs de Ligt (Bayern Munich)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Bilbao)	1
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	1
Nico Elvedi (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Paul Jaeckel (Union Berlin)	1
Reece James (Chelsea)	1
Kalidou Koulibaly (Chelsea)	1
Diogo Leite (Union Berlin)	1
Tyrell Malacia (Manchester United)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Bayern Munich)	1
Ben Mee (Brentford)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Cesar Montes (Espanyol)	1
Gonzalo Montiel (Sevilla)	1
Daniel Munoz (Genk)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Red Bull Salzburg)	1
Alfonso Pedraza (Villarreal)	1
Diego Rico (Real Sociedad)	1
Cristian Romero (Tottenham)	1
Alex Sandro (Juventus)	1
Antonio Silva (Benfica)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1
Aaron Wan-Bissaka (Manchester United)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	22
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	17
Pedri (Barcelona)	14
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	11
Casemiro (Manchester United)	10
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	10
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	9
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	9
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	8
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	8
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	7
Sofyan Amrabat (Fiorentina)	5
Gavi (Barcelona)	4
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	4
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	4
Granit Xhaka (Arsenal)	4
Przemyslaw Frankowski (Lens)	2
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	2
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	2
Thomas Partey (Arsenal)	2
Marco Verratti (PSG)	2
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	2
Martin Zubimendi (Real Sociedad)	2
Benjamin Bourigeaud (Rennes)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Brahim Diaz (Milan)	1
Christian Eriksen (Manchester United)	1

Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Mohammed Kudus (Ajax)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Alexis Mac Allister (Brighton)	1
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Lazio)	1
Azzedine Ounahi (Marseille)	1
Roberto Pereyra (Udinese)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (RB Leipzig)	1
Thiago (Liverpool)	1
Vitinha (PSG)	1
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	1

FORWARDS

Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	42
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	25
Lionel Messi (PSG)	22
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	17
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	13
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	12
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	11
Neymar (PSG)	8
Marcus Rashford (Manchester United)	8
Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	6
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	4
Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal)	3
Enner Valencia (Fenerbahce)	3
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Sheraldo Becker (Union Berlin)	2
Ousmane Dembele (Barcelona)	2
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	2
Gabriel Jesus (Arsenal)	2
Rafael Leao (Milan)	2
Sadio Mane (Bayern Munich)	2
Eddie Nketiah (Arsenal)	2
Cristiano Ronaldo (Al Nassr)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	2
Sofiane Boufal (Al Rayyan)	1
Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting (Bayern Munich)	1
Olivier Giroud (Milan)	1
Vincent Janssen (Antwerp)	1
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Jesper Lindstrom (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	1
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Paul Onuachu (Southampton)	1
Lois Openda (Lens)	1
Dango Ouattara (Bournemouth)	1
Ivan Perisic (Tottenham)	1
Richarlison (Tottenham)	1
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Martin Terrier (Rennes)	1
Ivan Toney (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

2022 CLUB WORLD CUP

AL AHLY (EGY)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Mohamed **EL SHENAWY**	(34) 18.12.88
16	Aly **LOTFI**	(33) 14.10.89
33	Hamza **ALAA**	(21) 01.03.01

DEFENDERS

2	Khaled **ABDEL FATTAH**	(24) 22.01.99
4	Mahmoud **METWALLI**	(30) 04.01.93
5	Ramy **RABIA**	(29) 20.05.93
6	Yasser **IBRAHIM**	(29) 10.02.93
13	Marwan **ATTIA**	(24) 01.08.98
21	Ali **MAALOUL** (Tun)	(33) 01.01.90
24	Mohamed **ABDELMONEM**	(24) 01.02.99
30	Mohamed **HANY**	(27) 25.01.96

MIDFIELDERS

8	Hamdy **FATHY**	(28) 29.09.94
14	Hussein **EL SHAHAT**	(30) 21.06.92
15	Aliou **DIENG** (Mli)	(25) 16.10.97
17	Amr **EL SOLIA**	(32) 02.04.90
19	Mohamed **MAGDY AFSHA**	(26) 06.03.96
27	Taher **MOHAMED**	(25) 31.12.97
34	Mohamed **FAKHRI**	(23) 04.03.99
40	Mohamed **ASHRAF ROQA**	(23) 07.05.99

FORWARDS

7	**KAHRABA**	(28) 13.04.94
9	Ahmed **ABDEL KADER**	(23) 23.05.99
10	Mohamed **SHERIF**	(26) 04.02.96
23	Percy **TAU** (RSA)	(28) 13.05.94

COACH

	Marcel **KOLLER** (Sui)	(62) 11.11.60

AL HILAL (KSA)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Abdullah **AL MAYOUF**	(36) 23.01.87
21	Mohammed **AL OWAIS**	(31) 10.10.91
31	Habib **AL WOTAYAN**	(26) 08.08.96

DEFENDERS

4	Khalifah **AL DAWSARI**	(24) 02.01.99
5	Ali **AL BULAYHI**	(33) 21.11.89
20	**JANG** Hyun-soo (Kor)	(31) 28.09.91
42	Muath **FAQIHI**	(20) 30.05.02
66	Saud **ABDULHAMID**	(23) 18.07.99
67	Mohammed **AL KHAIBARI**	(20) 18.04.02
70	Mohammed **JAHFALI**	(32) 24.10.90

MIDFIELDERS

6	Gustavo **CUELLAR** (Col)	(30) 14.10.92
8	Abdullah **OTAYF**	(30) 03.08.92
10	Luciano **VIETTO** (Arg)	(29) 05.12.93
16	Nasser **AL DAWSARI**	(24) 19.12.98
19	Andre **CARRILLO** (Per)	(31) 14.06.91
28	Mohamed **KANNO**	(28) 22.09.94
29	Salem **AL DAWSARI**	(31) 19.08.91
43	Musab **AL JUWAYR**	(19) 20.06.03

FORWARDS

9	Odion **IGHALO** (Nga)	(33) 16.06.89
11	Saleh **AL SHEHRI**	(29) 01.11.93
14	Abdullah **AL HAMDAN**	(23) 13.09.99
17	Moussa **MAREGA** (Mli)	(31) 14.04.91
96	**MICHAEL** (Bra)	(26) 12.03.96

COACH

	Ramon **DIAZ** (Arg)	(63) 29.08.59

AUCKLAND CITY (NZL)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Conor **TRACEY**	(25) 13.04.97
18	Finn **DOCKERTY**	(19) 18.08.03
24	Cameron **BROWN**	(23) 09.07.99

DEFENDERS

2	Mario **ILICH**	(27) 23.06.95
3	Adam **MITCHELL**	(26) 01.06.96
4	Christian **GRAY**	(26) 29.11.96
5	Nikko **BOXALL**	(30) 24.02.92
12	Regont **MURATI**	(26) 14.05.96
13	Nathan **LOBO**	(20) 16.12.02
23	Matt **ELLIS**	(21) 27.02.01
25	Takuya **IWATA** (Jpn)	(39) 22.04.83

MIDFIELDERS

7	Cameron **HOWIESON**	(28) 22.12.94
8	Gerard **GARRIGA** (Spa)	(29) 28.05.93
10	Dylan **MANICKUM**	(30) 16.06.92
14	Jordan **VALE**	(28) 15.04.94
15	Aidan **CAREY**	(21) 10.07.01
17	Reid **DRAKE**	(27) 19.01.96
20	Emiliano **TADE** (Arg)	(34) 03.03.88
21	Michael **DEN HEIJER**	(26) 14.04.96

FORWARDS

9	Angus **KILKOLLY**	(26) 18.04.96
11	Ryan **DE VRIES**	(31) 14.09.91
16	Joseph **LEE**	(20) 12.07.02
19	William **GILLION**	(20) 17.10.02

COACH

	Albert **RIERA** (Spa)	(39) 28.12.83

FLAMENGO (BRA)

GOALKEEPERS

1	**SANTOS**	(32) 17.03.90
25	**MATHEUS CUNHA**	(21) 24.05.01
45	**HUGO SOUZA**	(24) 31.01.99

DEFENDERS

2	Guillermo **VARELA** (Uru)	(29) 24.03.93
3	**RODRIGO CAIO**	(29) 17.08.93
4	**LEO PEREIRA**	(27) 31.01.96
6	**AYRTON**	(25) 19.06.97
15	**FABRICIO BRUNO**	(26) 12.02.96
16	**FILIPE LUIS**	(37) 09.08.85
23	David **LUIZ**	(35) 22.04.87
30	**PABLO**	(31) 21.06.91
34	**MATHEUZINHO**	(22) 08.09.00

MIDFIELDERS

5	Erick **PULGAR** (Chi)	(29) 15.01.94
7	**EVERTON RIBEIRO**	(33) 10.04.89
8	**THIAGO MAIA**	(25) 23.03.97
14	Giorgian **DE ARRASCAETA** (Uru)	(28) 01.06.94
20	**GERSON**	(25) 20.05.97
31	**MARINHO**	(32) 29.05.90
32	Arturo **VIDAL** (Chi)	(35) 22.05.87

FORWARDS

9	**PEDRO**	(25) 20.06.97
10	**GABRIEL BARBOSA**	(26) 30.08.96
11	**EVERTON**	(26) 22.03.96
42	**MATHEUS FRANCA**	(18) 01.04.04

COACH

	Vitor **PEREIRA** (Por)	(54) 26.07.68

REAL MADRID (SPA)

GOALKEEPERS

13	Andriy **LUNIN** (Ukr)	(23) 11.02.99
26	Luis **LOPEZ**	(21) 08.05.01
30	Lucas **CANIZARES**	(20) 10.05.02

DEFENDERS

2	Dani **CARVAJAL**	(31) 11.01.92
3	**EDER MILITAO** (Bra)	(25) 18.01.98
4	David **ALABA** (Aut)	(30) 24.06.92
5	Jesus **VALLEJO**	(26) 05.01.97
6	**NACHO**	(33) 18.01.90
16	Alvaro **ODRIOZOLA**	(27) 14.12.95
22	Antonio **RUDIGER** (Ger)	(29) 03.03.93

MIDFIELDERS

8	Toni **KROOS** (Ger)	(33) 04.01.90
10	Luka **MODRIC** (Cro)	(37) 09.09.85
12	Eduardo **CAMAVINGA** (Fra)	(20) 10.11.02
15	Federico **VALVERDE** (Uru)	(24) 22.07.98
18	Aurelien **TCHOUAMENI** (Fra)	(23) 27.01.00
19	Dani **CEBALLOS**	(26) 07.08.96
31	Mario **MARTIN**	(18) 05.03.04
33	Sergio **ARRIBAS**	(21) 30.09.01

FORWARDS

9	Karim **BENZEMA** (Fra)	(35) 19.12.87
11	Marco **ASENSIO**	(27) 21.01.96
20	**VINICIUS JUNIOR** (Bra)	(22) 12.07.00
21	**RODRYGO** (Bra)	(22) 09.01.01
24	**MARIANO** (Dom)	(29) 01.08.93

COACH

	Carlo **ANCELOTTI** (Ita)	(63) 10.06.59

Top scorer...Flamengo's number nine Pedro netted four goals in Morocco

Star player...Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior won the Best Player award

SEATTLE SOUNDERS (USA)

GOALKEEPERS

24	Stefan **FREI**	(36) 20.04.86
29	Jacob **CASTRO**	(23) 18.12.99
30	Stefan **CLEVELAND**	(28) 24.05.94

DEFENDERS

3	Xavier **ARREAGA** (Ecu)	(28) 28.09.94
5	**NOUHOU** Tolo (Cmr)	(25) 23.06.97
16	Alex **ROLDAN** (Slv)	(26) 28.07.96
25	Jackson **RAGEN**	(24) 24.09.98
28	Yeimar **GOMEZ** (Col)	(30) 30.06.92
92	Abdoulaye **CISSOKO** (Fra)	(23) 27.12.99

MIDFIELDERS

6	**JOAO PAULO** (Bra)	(31) 08.03.91
7	Cristian **ROLDAN**	(27) 03.06.95
10	Nicolas **LODEIRO** (Uru)	(33) 21.03.89
11	Albert **RUSNAK** (Svk)	(28) 07.07.94
22	Kelyn **ROWE**	(31) 02.12.91
45	Ethan **DOBBELAERE**	(20) 14.11.02
75	Danny **LEYVA**	(19) 05.05.03
84	Josh **ATENCIO**	(21) 31.01.02
99	Dylan **TEVES**	(22) 04.05.00

FORWARDS

9	Raul **RUIDIAZ** (Per)	(32) 25.07.90
12	Fredy **MONTERO** (Col)	(35) 26.07.87
13	Jordan **MORRIS**	(28) 26.10.94
19	**HEBER** (Bra)	(31) 10.08.91
23	**LEO CHU** (Bra)	(22) 06.04.00

COACH

	Brian **SCHMETZER**	(60) 18.08.62

WYDAD (MAR)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Yanis **HENIN**	(23) 24.06.99
26	Ahmed Reda **TAGNAOUTI**	(26) 05.04.96
32	Youssef **EL MOTIE**	(28) 16.12.94

DEFENDERS

3	Houcine **BENAYADA** (Alg)	(30) 08.08.92
4	Amine **ABOULFATH**	(25) 29.10.97
14	Yahia **ATTIAT ALLAH**	(27) 02.03.95
22	Ayoub **EL AMLOUD**	(28) 08.04.94
25	Amine **FARHANE**	(24) 23.03.98
35	Arsene **ZOLA** (Cod)	(26) 23.02.96

MIDFIELDERS

2	Ismail **MOUTARAJI**	(23) 01.02.00
5	Yahya **JABRANE**	(31) 18.06.91
6	Jalal **DAOUDI**	(34) 17.08.88
8	Reda **JAADI**	(27) 14.02.95
13	Abdellah **HAIMOUD**	(21) 21.05.01
31	Hamza **AIT ALLAL**	(23) 08.01.00

FORWARDS

9	Didier **LAMKEL ZE** (Cmr)	(26) 17.09.96
10	Aymane **EL HASSOUNI**	(27) 22.02.95
11	Mohamed **OUNAJEM**	(31) 04.01.92
17	Badie **AOUK**	(27) 29.03.95
20	Bouly **SAMBOU** (Sen)	(25) 01.02.98
23	Hicham **BOUSSEFIANE**	(25) 09.01.98
30	Saifeddine **BOUHRA**	(22) 05.03.00
33	Hamid **AHADAD**	(28) 30.11.94

COACH

	Mehdi **NAFTI** (Tun)	(44) 28.11.78

(Ages as of 01.02.23)

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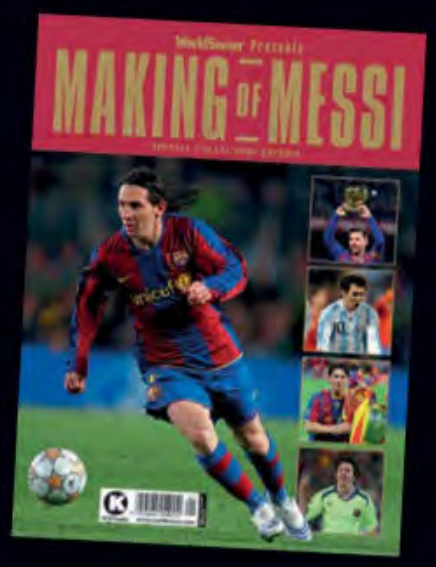

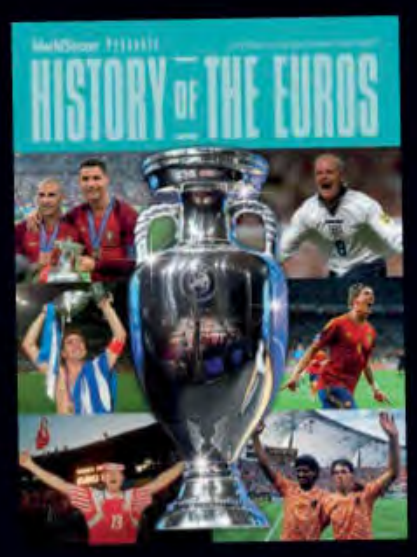

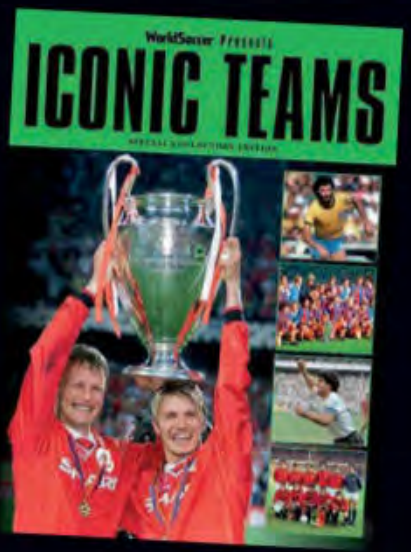

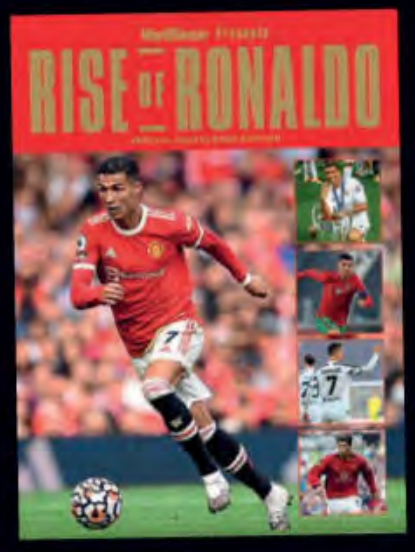

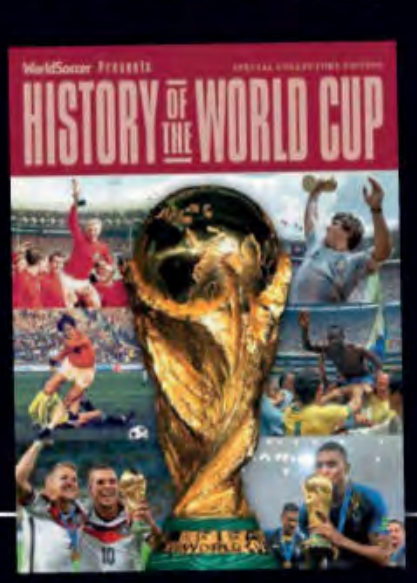

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Club Football

WORLD

2022 FIFA CLUB WORLD CUP

First Round

Feb 1 – Tangier
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (El Shahat 45+2, Sherif 56, Tau 86)
Auckland City (Nzl) 0
Al Ahly: El Shenawy – Hany, Metwalli, Abdelmonem, Maaloul; El Shahat (Mohamed 75), Fathi (Attia 80), Dieng, El Solia (Magdy Afsha 83), Abdel Kader (Tau 75); Sherif (Kahraba 80).
Auckland City: Tracey – Murati, Mitchell, Boxall, Lobo (Vale 71); Manickum (Lee 78), Garriga (Drake 78), Den Heijer, Howieson, Tade (Gillion 55); De Vries (Kilkolly 71).
Sent off: Mitchell 90+7.

Second Round

Feb 4 – Rabat
Wydad (Mar) 1 (El Amloud 52)
Al Hilal (KSA) 1 (Kanno 90+3 pen)
AET. Al Hilal win 5-3 on penalties
Wydad: Tagnaouti – El Amloud, Farhane, Zola, Attiat Allah; Daoudi, Jabrane, Jaadi (Sambou 95); Bouhra (Ounajem 74), Lamkel Ze (Boussefiane 67), El Hassouni.
Sent off: Jabrane 90.
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Abdulhamid, Jang Hyun-soo, Al Bulayhi, N. Al Dawsari (Al Hamdan 105+1); Kanno, Cuellar, S. Al Dawsari (Carrillo 82, Al Juwayr 113); Marega, Ighalo (Al Shehri 82), Michael (Vietto 87).
Sent off: Kanno 93.

Feb 4 – Tangier
Seattle Sounders (USA) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Magdy Afsha 88)
Seattle Sounders: Frei – A. Roldan, Gomez, Ragen (Montero 90+1), Nouhou; Rusnak (Heber 90+1), Atencio (Joao Paulo 68); C. Roldan (Levya 84), Lodeiro, Morris; Ruidiaz.
Al Ahly: El Shenawy – Hany, Metwalli, Abdelmonem, Maaloul; Tau (Rabia 90+3), Fathi (Magdy Afsha 64), Dieng, El Solia, Mohamed (Abdel Kader 63); Kahraba (Sherif 63).

Semi-Finals

Feb 7 – Tangier
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Pedro 29, 90+1)
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (S. Al Dawsari 4 pen, 45+9 pen, Vietto 70)
Flamengo: Santos – Matheuzinho, Luiz, Leo Pereira (Fabricio Bruno 46), Ayrton; Thiago Maia (Vidal 81), Gerson; Everton Ribeiro (Everton 68), De Arrascaeta (Pulgar 46), Gabriel Barbosa, Pedro.
Sent off: Gerson 45+8.
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Abdulhamid, Jang Hyun-soo, Al Bulayhi, N. Al Dawsari (K. Al Dawsari 66); Carrillo, Cuellar; Marega, Vietto (Jahfali 88), S. Al Dawsari; Ighalo (Michael 57).

Feb 8 – Rabat
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Maaloul 65 pen)
Real Madrid (Spa) 4 (Vinicius Junior 42, Valverde 46, Rodrygo 90+2, Arribas 90+8)
Al Ahly: El Shenawy – Hany, Metwalli, Abdelmonem, Maaloul; El Shahat (Mohamed 75), Dieng (Fathi 61), El Solia, Abdel Kader; Magdy Afsha (Kahraba 88), Sherif (Tau 61).
Real Madrid: Lunin – Nacho, Rudiger, Alaba, Camavinga; Modric (Odriozola 90+5), Tchouameni, Kroos (Ceballos 77); Valverde, Rodrygo (Mariano 90+5), Vinicius Junior (Arribas 90+8).

Third-Placed Match

Feb 11 – Tangier
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Abdel Kader 38, 60)
Flamengo (Bra) 4 (Gabriel Barbosa 11 pen, 85 pen, Pedro 77, 90+1)
Al Ahly: El Shenawy – Abdel Fattah, Ibrahim, Abdelmonem, Maaloul (El Shahat 90); Mohamed, Attia, Fathi (Dieng 90), Abdel Kader; Sherif (Hany 75), Tau.
Sent off: Abdel Fattah 69.
Flamengo: Santos – Varela, Fabricio Bruno, Luiz (Pablo 87), Ayrton; Thiago Maia, Vidal; Everton Ribeiro (Everton 63), De Arrascaeta (Pulgar 90+8), Gabriel Barbosa, Pedro (Matheus Franca 90+8).

Final

Feb 11 – Rabat
Real Madrid (Spa) 5 (Vinicius Junior 13, 69, Valverde 18, 58, Benzema 54)
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Marega 26, Vietto 63, 79)
Real Madrid: Lunin – Carvajal (Vallejo 79), Rudiger, Alaba, Camavinga; Modric (Nacho 74), Tchouameni (Ceballos 62), Kroos (Asensio 74); Valverde, Benzema (Rodrygo 62), Vinicius Junior.
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Abdulhamid, Jang Hyun-soo, Al Bulayhi, K. Al Dawsari; Kanno, Cuellar; Carrillo (Michael 75), Vietto (Al Hamdan 87), S. Al Dawsari (N. Al Dawsari 75); Marega (Ighalo 86).

EUROPE

2022-23 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Round of 16 – 1st Legs

Feb 14 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 1 (Brahim 7)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 0

Feb 14 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Coman 53)

Feb 15 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Adeyemi 63)
Chelsea (Eng) 0

Feb 15 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 0
Benfica (Por) 2 (Joao Mario 51 pen, Neres 88)

Feb 21 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Osimhen 40, Di Lorenzo 65)

Feb 21 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 2 (Nunez 4, Salah 14)
Real Madrid (Spa) 5 (Vinicius Junior 21, 36, Militao 47, Benzema 55, 67)

Feb 22 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Lukaku 86)
Porto (Por) 0

Feb 22 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig 1 (Gvardiol 70)
Manchester City 1 (Mahrez 27)

2022-23 EUROPA LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Legs

Feb 16 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 0
Union Berlin (Ger) 0

Feb 16 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Alonso 50, Raphinha 76)
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Rashford 52, Kounde 59 og)

Feb 16 – Leverkusen
Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Diaby 48, Wirtz 59)
Monaco (Fra) 3 (Hradecky 9 og, Diatta 74, Disasi 90+2)

Feb 16 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Vlahovic 13)
Nantes (Fra) 1 (Blas 69)

Feb 16 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1 (Capaldo 88)
Roma (Ita) 0

Feb 16 – Seville
Sevilla (Spa) 3 (En-Nesyri 45+2, Ocampos 50, Gudelj 55)
PSV (Ned) 0

Feb 16 – Warsaw
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 (Kryskiv 11, Bondarenko 45 pen)
Rennes (Fra) 1 (Toko Ekambi 59)

Feb 16 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 1 (Coates 90+4)
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Ashour 77)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Legs

Feb 23 – Berlin
Union Berlin (Ger) 3 (Knoche 20 pen, Juranovic 44, Doekhi 50)
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Kudus 47)
Union Berlin win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Fred 47, Antony 73)
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Lewandowski 18 pen)
Manchester United win 4-3 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Ben Yedder 19 pen, Embolo 84)
Leverkusen (Ger) 3 (Wirtz 13, Palacios 21, Adli 58)
AET. 5-5 on aggregate. Leverkusen win 5-3 on pens

Feb 23 – Nantes
Nantes (Fra) 0
Juventus (Ita) 3 (Di Maria 5, 20 pen, 78)
Juventus win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (Belotti 33, Dybala 40)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0
Roma win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 2 (L. De Jong 77, Silva 90+5)
Sevilla (Spa) 0
Sevilla win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Rennes
Rennes (Fra) 2 (Toko Ekambi 52, Salah 106)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Belocian 119 og)
AET. 3-3 on aggregate. Shakhtar win 5-4 on pens

Feb 23 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 0
Sporting (Por) 4 (Coates 21, Goncalves 50, 77, Gartenmann 85 og)
Sporting win 5-1 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Union Berlin (Ger) v Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel); Sevilla (Spa) v Fenerbahce (Tur); Juventus (Ita) v Freiburg (Ger); Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) v Ferencvaros (Hun); Sporting (Por) v Arsenal (Eng); Manchester United (Eng) v Real Betis (Spa); Roma (Ita) v Real Sociedad (Spa); Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) v Feyenoord (Ned)

2022-23 EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Legs

Feb 16 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 1 (Garcia 84)
Dnipro-1 (Ukr) 0

Feb 16 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 0
Lech Poznan (Pol) 0

Feb 16 – Braga
Braga (Por) 0
Fiorentina (Ita) 4 (Jovic 45+1, 60, Cabral 79, 90)

Feb 16 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 1 (Immobile 45+4)
CFR Cluj (Rou) 0

Feb 16 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 1 (Thiago 9)
Anderlecht (Bel) 0

Feb 16 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 1 (Andrade 78)
Gent (Bel) 0

Feb 16 – Chisinau
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0
Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Gomes 45)

Feb 16 – Trabzon
Trabzonspor (Tur) 1 (Stryger Larsen 65)
Basel (Sui) 0

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Legs

Feb 23 – Kosice
Dnipro-1 (Ukr) 0
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0
AEK Larnaca win 1-0 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Ishak 63)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 0
Lech Poznan win 1-0 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 3 (Mandragora 37, Saponara 58, Cabral 83)
Braga (Por) 2 (Castro 16, Djalo 34)
Fiorentina win 7-2 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Cluj-Napoca
CFR Cluj (Rou) 0
Lazio (Ita) 0
Lazio win 1-0 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Russo 13 og, Verschaeren 68)
Ludogorets (Bul) 1 (Thiago 71)
AET. 2-2 on aggregate. Anderlecht win 3-0 on pens

Feb 23 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 1 (Orban 74)
Qarabag (Aze) 0
AET. 1-1 on aggregate. Gent win 5-3 on pens

Feb 23 – Belgrade
Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Menig 13)
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 3 (Badolo 22 pen, Diop 45+1, 47)
Sheriff Tiraspol win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 2 (Amdouni 13, Zeqiri 76)
Trabzonspor (Tur) 0
Basel win 2-1 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

AEK Larnaca (Cyp) v West Ham Utd (Eng); Lazio (Ita) v AZ (Ned); Fiorentina (Ita) v Sivasspor (Tur); Lech Poznan (Pol) v Djurgardens (Swe); Basel (Sui) v Slovan Bratislava (Svk); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) v Nice (Fra); Anderlecht (Bel) v Villarreal (Spa); Gent (Bel) v Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur)

2022-23 ENGLISH LEAGUE CUP

Final

Feb 26 – Wembley
Manchester Utd 2 (Casemiro 33, Rashford 39)
Newcastle Utd 0
Manchester Utd: De Gea – Dalot (Wan-Bissaka 46), Varane, Martinez, Shaw; Fred (Sabitzer 69), Casemiro; Antony (Sancho 83), Fernandes, Rashford (Maguire 88); Weghorst (McTominay 70).
Newcastle Utd: Karius – Trippier, Schar, Botman, Burn; S. Longstaff (Isak 46), Guimaraes (Willock 79), Joelinton; Almiron (Anderson 90+1), Wilson (Ritchie 90+1), Saint-Maximin (Murphy 78).

2022-23 SCOTTISH LEAGUE CUP

Final

Feb 26 – Hampden Park
Rangers 1 (Morelos 64)
Celtic 2 (Furuhashi 44, 56)
Rangers: McGregor – Tavernier, Goldson, Davies, Barisic; Tillman (Jack 65), Lundstram (Cantwell 65), Kamara (Raskin 65); Sakala (Wright 84), Morelos (Colak 76), Kent.
Celtic: Hart – Johnston, Carter-Vickers, Starfelt, Taylor; Mooy (O'Riley 65), McGregor, Hatate (Iwata 76); Jota (Abada 64), Furuhashi (Oh Hyeon-Gyo 76), Maeda (Haksabanovic 84).

SOUTH AMERICA

2023 COPA LIBERTADORES

First Qualifying Stage – 1st Legs

Feb 7 – Huancayo
Sport Huancayo (Per) 2 (Escobar 52, Huaccha 90+6)
Nacional (Par) 1 (Brizuela 69)

Feb 8 – La Paz
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 1 (Prost 45+1)
El Nacional (Ecu) 6 (Ordonez 5, 38, Chala 13, Carrillo 16, Solis 45+4, Asprilla 89)

Feb 9 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 3 (Costa 23, Acuna 55, Gomez 64)
Zamora (Ven) 1 (Magallan 75)

First Qualifying Stage – 2nd Legs

Feb 14 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 3 (Ocampos 62, Martinez 69, Fleitas 90+8)
Sport Huancayo (Per) 1 (Millan 39)
Nacional win 4-3 on aggregate

Feb 15 – Quito
El Nacional (Ecu) 3 (Micolta 18, Julio 45, Palacios 90+1)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 1 (Cristaldo 55)
El Nacional win 9-2 on aggregate

Feb 16 – Barinas
Zamora (Ven) 0
Boston River (Uru) 1 (Urretaviscaya 20)
Boston River win 4-1 on aggregate

Second Qualifying Stage – 1st Legs

Feb 21 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 2 (Martinez 46, Aguilar 90+7)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0

Feb 21 – Rancagua
Curico Unido (Chi) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Patino 89)

Feb 22 – Valencia
Carabobo (Ven) 0
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0

Feb 22 – Quito
El Nacional (Ecu) 2 (Palacios 55, Carrillo 67 pen)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 2 (Valencia 19, Londono 87)

Feb 22 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 0
Huracan (Arg) 0

Feb 23 – Maldonado
Deportivo Maldonado (Uru) 0
Fortaleza (Bra) 0

Feb 23 – Rancagua
Magallanes (Chi) 3 (Vilches 21, Pinero 80, Filla 89)
Always Ready (Bol) 0

Feb 23 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 0
Millonarios (Col) 0

Second Qualifying Stage – 2nd Legs

Feb 28 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 5 (Avila 46, 67, Ignacio 74, Lora 89, Corozo 90+5)
Nacional (Par) 1 (Caballero 47)
Sporting Cristal win 5-3 on aggregate

Feb 28 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Morales 51)
Curico Unido (Chi) 0
Cerro Porteno win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 1 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 3 (Hulk 16, Paulinho 18, Edenilson 73)
Carabobo (Ven) 1 (Pernia 45+3)
Atletico Mineiro win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 1 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 2 (Monroy 67, Cambindo 73)
El Nacional (Ecu) 1 (Parrales 90+2)
Independiente Medellin win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 1 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 1 (Coccaro 45+7 pen)
Boston River (Uru) 0
Huracan win 1-0 on aggregate

Mar 2 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 4 (Thiago Galhardo 45+5, Lucero 83, 90+2, Guilherme 86)
Deportivo Maldonado (Uru) 0
Fortaleza win 4-0 on aggregate

Mar 2 – La Paz
Always Ready (Bol) 1 (Reyes 90+1)
Magallanes (Chi) 3 (M. Vasquez 9, Alfaro 50, Flores 53)
Magallanes win 6-1 on aggregate

Mar 2 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 2 (Castro 62, Catano 69)
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 1 (Diaz 38 pen)
Millonarios win 2-1 on aggregate

2023 CONMEBOL RECOPA

Feb 21 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Carabajal 69)
Flamengo (Bra) 0
Independiente del Valle: Ramirez – Carabajal, Schunke, Garcia Basso; Fernandez, Pellerano (Ortiz 73), Faravelli, Caicedo (Minda 84); Diaz (Hoyos 73), Sornoza (Previtali 90+3), Rodriguez (Alcivar 84).
Sent off: Ortiz 88.
Flamengo: Santos – Varela, Fabricio Bruno, Luiz, Ayrton; Thiago Maia (Goncalves 86), Everton Ribeiro (Everton 78), Vidal, De Arrascaeta; Gabriel Barbosa, Pedro (Pulgar 63).

Feb 28 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (De Arrascaeta 90+6)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0
AET. 1-1 on aggregate. I. del Valle win 5-4 on pens
Flamengo: Santos – Varela (Matheuzinho 82), Fabricio Bruno, Luiz, Ayrton (Marinho 112); Thiago Maia (Gerson 72), Everton Ribeiro (Goncalves 82), Vidal (Everton 72), De Arrascaeta; Gabriel Barbosa, Pedro (Pulgar 63).
Independiente del Valle: Ramirez – Carabajal, Schunke, Garcia Basso; Fernandez (Mercado 90+2), Pellerano (Previtali 100), Faravelli, Caicedo (Cortez 99); Alcivar (Rodriguez 63), Diaz (Landazuri 72), Sornoza (Hoyos 72).

AFRICA

2022-23 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Feb 11 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0

Feb 17 – Algiers
JS Kabylie (Alg) 1 (Souyad 87)
Wydad (Mar) 0

Feb 18 – Brazzaville
AS Vita (Cod) 1 (Kabwe 82)
Petro Atletico (Ang) 2 (Azulao 32, Cruz 65)

Feb 24 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Jabrane 34 pen)
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0

Feb 25 – Brazzaville
AS Vita (Cod) 1 (Mabidi 65)
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petro Atletico	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
JS Kabylie	3	1	1	1	1	1	4
AS Vita Club	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Wydad	2	1	0	1	1	1	3

Group B

Feb 11 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Mailula 25)
Al Hilal (Sdn) 0

Feb 17 – Garoua
Coton Sport (Cmr) 1 (Wassou 30)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 3 (Mailula 10, 43, Mudau 11)

Feb 18 – Omdurman
Al Hilal (Sdn) 1 (Lilepo 53)
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Feb 24 – Garoua
Coton Sport (Cmr) 1 (Wassou 43)
Al Hilal (Sdn) 2 (Lilepo 52, 57)

Feb 25 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Abdelmonem 59, El Shahat 74)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Shalulile 34, Morena 80)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sundowns	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Al Hilal	3	2	0	1	3	2	6
Al Ahly	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Coton Sport	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

Group C

Feb 10 – Casablanca
Raja (Mar) 5 (Khabba 5, Harkass 11, Zrida 38, Bouzok 59, Aholou 71)
Vipers (Uga) 0

Feb 11 – Conakry
Horoya (Gui) 1 (P. A. N'Diaye 18)
Simba (Tan) 0

Feb 18 – Entebbe
Vipers (Uga) 0
Horoya (Gui) 0

Feb 18 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 0
Raja (Mar) 3 (Khabba 30, Benjdida 82, Mokadem 86 pen)

Feb 25 – Entebbe
Vipers (Uga) 0
Simba (Tan) 1 (Baka 20)

Feb 25 – Casablanca
Raja (Mar) 2 (Khabba 43, Zerhouni 89)
Horoya (Gui) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Raja	3	3	0	0	10	0	9
Horoya	3	1	1	1	1	2	4
Simba	3	1	0	2	1	4	3
Vipers	3	0	1	2	0	6	1

Group D

Feb 10 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 0
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Wamba 57 pen)

Feb 11 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Tougai 90+4)
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 0

Feb 17 – Benghazi
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 0
Zamalek (Egy) 0

Feb 18 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 0
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Elhouni 80)

Feb 24 – Benghazi
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 1 (Sergio 32 pen)
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 0

Feb 25 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 2 (Ben Hammouda 35, Ben Romdhane 90+2)
Zamalek (Egy) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance	3	3	0	0	4	0	9
Al Merrikh	3	1	1	1	1	1	4
CR Belouizdad	3	1	0	2	1	2	3
Zamalek	3	0	1	2	0	3	1

2022-23 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Feb 12 – Johannesburg
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 4 (Nku 5, Chivaviro 21, 57, Malongoane 85)
Al Akhdar (Lby) 1 (Alzawi 80)

Feb 12 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 3 (Bousseliou 7, 65, Mahious 82)
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 0

Feb 19 – Ndola
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Kabango 82)
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 2 (Mvelase 24, Chivaviro 43)

Feb 19 – Benghazi
Al Akhdar (Lby) 1 (Shafshuf 67 pen)
USM Alger (Alg) 1 (Orebonye 77)

Feb 26 – Ndola
Saint-Eloi Lupopo 1 (Lobota 45+2)
Al Akhdar (Lby) 0

Feb 26 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 2 (Meziane 39, Belaid 89)
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger	3	2	1	0	6	1	7
Marumo Gallants	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Saint-Eloi Lupopo	3	1	0	2	2	5	3
Al Akhdar	3	0	1	2	2	6	1

Group B

Feb 12 – Yamoussoukro
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0
Motema Pembe (Cod) 0

Feb 12 – Brazzaville
Diables Noirs (Cgo) 3 (Wunda 30, Ngombe 32, Massoumou 37 pen)
Rivers United (Nga) 0

Feb 19 – Luanda
Motema Pembe (Cod) 0
Diables Noirs (Cgo) 0

Feb 19 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 3 (Ohawume 1, Williams 42, Ndassi 48)
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0

Feb 26 – Yamoussoukro
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 2 (Karamoko 65, Kouame 75)
Diables Noirs (Cgo) 0

Feb 26 – Luanda
Motema Pembe (Cod) 0
Rivers United (Nga) 1 (Acquah 53)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rivers United	3	2	0	1	4	3	6
ASEC Abidjan	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Diables Noirs	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Motema Pembe	3	0	2	1	0	1	2

Group C

Feb 12 – Lome
ASKO Kara (Tog) 1 (Tchoutchoui 3)
Future (Egy) 1 (Farouk 81)

Feb 12 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 2 (Fathi 1, El Said 75)
ASFAR (Mar) 2 (Diney 25, Sahd 73)

Feb 19 – Cairo
Future (Egy) 1 (Mohamed 53)
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Hamdy 7)

Feb 19 – Rabat
ASFAR (Mar) 5 (Hrimat 39, Hamoudan 50, Igamane 63, Sahd 67, Fati 90+2)
ASKO Kara (Tog) 1 (Ouro-Bodi 16)

Feb 26 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Ben Youssef 28)
ASKO Kara (Tog) 0

Feb 26 – Rabat
ASFAR (Mar) 2 (Igamane 30, Diakite 90)
Future (Egy) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASFAR	3	2	1	0	9	3	7
Pyramids	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Future	3	0	2	1	2	4	2
ASKO Kara	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group D

Feb 12 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 3 (Kitambala 24, Ngonga 38, Mwamba 90+4)
Real Bamako (Mli) 1 (S. Coulibaly 32)

Feb 12 – Tunis
US Monastir (Tun) 2 (Saghraoui 10, Traore 16)
Young Africans (Tan) 0

Feb 19 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 3 (Musonda 7, Yahya 11, Kisinda 90+2)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1 (Ngonga 80)

Feb 19 – Bamako
Real Bamako (Mli) 1 (Samabaly 48)
US Monastir (Tun) 1 (Aloui 77)

Feb 26 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0
US Monastir (Tun) 2 (Traore 51, Aloui 90+3)

Feb 26 – Bamako
Real Bamako (Mli) 1 (Kone 90+1)
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Mayele 60)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
US Monastir	3	2	1	0	5	1	7
Young Africans	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
TP Mazembe	3	1	0	2	4	6	3
Real Bamako	3	0	2	1	3	5	2

BENIN

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Buffles	16	9	5	2	24	12	32
Damissa	16	9	4	3	13	6	31
Cavaliers	16	6	8	2	18	11	26
Takunnin	16	7	4	5	20	9	25
Pantheres	16	5	6	5	12	9	21
Dynamo Parakou	16	5	6	5	9	15	21
Beke Bembereke*	16	3	8	5	12	13	13
Real Sport	16	1	9	6	3	11	12
Dynamique Djougou	16	1	2	13	6	31	5

*Deducted four points

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Loto Popo	16	11	2	3	23	7	35
Dadje	16	9	4	3	19	12	31
Dynamo Abomey	16	9	3	4	28	15	30
Bani Ganse	16	8	4	4	21	20	28
Hodio	16	7	5	4	22	9	26
Tonnerre	16	6	3	7	15	19	21
Espoir Savalou	16	5	3	8	18	24	18
Energie	16	3	2	11	10	25	11
Soleil	16	0	2	14	14	39	2

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Coton Sport Ouidah	16	10	6	0	28	5	36
Requins	16	9	5	2	25	10	32
ASPAC	16	7	7	2	20	12	28
AS Cotonou	16	6	6	4	17	10	24
OFMAS-SAD	16	6	4	6	17	15	22
Aziza	16	5	1	10	12	28	16
Adjidja	16	3	5	8	10	20	14
Police	16	3	3	10	12	29	12
Sitatunga	16	2	5	9	8	20	11

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ayema	16	7	7	2	20	10	28
ASVO	16	7	6	3	23	13	27
JAK	16	6	8	2	15	12	26
Dragons	16	6	7	3	10	9	25
JSP	16	6	3	7	16	15	21
Sobemap*	16	7	5	4	16	14	20
Djeffa	16	5	5	6	13	15	20
Avrankou Omnisport	16	2	4	10	10	22	10
JSO	16	3	1	12	12	25	10

*Deducted six points

The top four teams from each group qualify for the Championship Round, with the bottom five teams qualifying for the Relegation Round

ASIA

2022-23 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

West Region

Last 16

Feb 19 – Al Wakrah
Al Shabab (KSA) 2 (Al Qahtani 12, Banega 54)
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 0

Feb 19 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 1 (Muntari 107)
Al Rayyan (Qat) 1 (N'Zonzi 120+3)
AET. Al Duhail win 7-6 on penalties

Feb 20 –Al Wakrah
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Ighalo 17, Jang Hyun-soo 73, Vietto 79)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 1 (Kharbin 86)

Feb 20 – Doha
Al Faisaly (KSA) 0
Foolad (Irn) 1 (Ansari 63)

Quarter-Finals

Feb 23 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 2 (Olunga 77, 85)
Al Shabab (KSA) 1 (Al Rubaie 90+3)

Feb 23 – Al Wakrah
Foolad (Irn) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 1 (Marega 87)

Semi-Finals

Feb 26 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 7 (Ighalo 2, 10, 48, 62, Marega 14, 27, S. Al Dawsari 38)

CONCACAF

MARTINIQUE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Golden Lion*	14	12	1	1	36	14	51
Diamantinoise*	14	8	3	3	28	11	41
Aiglon*	14	8	2	4	27	15	40
Case-Pilote**	14	7	4	3	25	15	39
Club Peleen**	14	5	2	7	19	22	31
Golden Star**	14	4	3	7	25	26	29
Trenelle**	14	1	3	10	8	26	20
Good Luck**	14	1	2	11	19	58	19

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Colonial*	14	9	4	1	27	7	45
Club Franciscain*	14	8	1	5	22	18	39
Samaritaine*	14	7	2	5	17	16	37
Assaut**	14	6	3	5	24	21	35
RC Saint Joseph**	14	6	2	6	14	14	34
New Club**	14	5	2	7	20	25	31
US Robert**	14	3	2	9	10	19	25
Vert-Pre**	14	2	4	8	15	29	24

*Qualify for the Championship Round
**Qualifying for the Relegation Round

TURKS & CAICOS

2022-23 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
SWA Sharks*	8	6	2	0	24	6	20
Teachers	8	3	3	2	29	20	12
Academy Eagles	8	2	4	2	11	9	10
Flamingo	8	2	1	5	14	31	7
Beaches	8	0	4	4	11	23	4
Blue Hills	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Advance to the Champion Play-Off

OCEANIA

SOLOMON ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Solomon Warriors (C)	22	17	4	1	61	19	55
KOSSA	22	15	3	4	66	27	48
Central Coast	22	15	2	5	68	22	47
Henderson Eels	22	13	4	5	57	29	43
Laugu United	22	12	4	6	48	32	40
Waneagu United	22	11	6	5	57	30	39
Marist Fire	22	8	5	9	27	29	29
Honiara City	21	6	4	11	29	40	22
Isabel United	22	5	3	14	29	55	18
Southern United	22	3	6	13	37	63	15
Real Kakamora	22	3	1	18	21	91	10
Kula (R)	21	1	2	18	25	88	5

Internationals

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Group A
Mar 25: Scotland v Cyprus; Spain v Norway
Mar 28: Georgia v Norway; Scotland v Spain

Group B
Mar 24: France v Netherlands; Gibraltar v Greece
Mar 27: Netherlands v Gibraltar; Republic of Ireland v Spain

Group C
Mar 23: Italy v England; N. Macedonia v Malta
Mar 26: England v Ukraine; Malta v Italy

Group D
Mar 25: Armenia v Turkey; Croatia v Wales
Mar 28: Turkey v Croatia; Wales v Latvia

Group E
Mar 24: Czech Rep v Poland; Moldova v Faroe Isl.
Mar 27: Moldova v Czech Rep; Poland v Albania

Group F
Mar 24: Austria v Azerbaijan; Sweden v Belgium
Mar 27: Austria v Estonia; Sweden v Azerbaijan

Group G
Mar 24: Bulgaria v Montenegro; Serbia v Lithuania
Mar 27: Hungary v Bulgaria; Montenegro v Serbia

Group H
Mar 23: Kazakhstan v Slovenia; Denmark v Finland; San Marino v Northern Ireland
Mar 26: Kazakhstan v Denmark; Slovenia v Denmark; Northern Ireland v Finland

Group I
Mar 25: Belarus v Switzerland; Israel v Kosovo; Andorra v Romania
Mar 28: Kosovo v Andorra; Romania v Belarus; Switzerland v Israel

Group J
Mar 23: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Iceland; Portugal v Liechtenstein; Slovakia v Luxembourg
Mar 26: Liechtenstein v Iceland; Luxembourg v Portugal; Slovakia v Bosnia & Herzegovina

AFCON 2023 QUALIFIERS

Group A
Mar 22-24: Sierra Leone v Sao Tome e Principe; Nigeria v Guinea-Bissau
Mar 26-27: Sao Tome e Principe v Sierra Leone; Guinea-Bissau v Nigeria

Group B
Mar 24: Cape Verde v Eswatini; Burkina Faso v Togo
Mar 28: Eswatini v Cape Verde; Togo v Burkina Faso

Group C
Mar 23: Cameroon v Namibia
Mar 28: Namibia v Cameroon

Group D
Mar 24: Egypt v Malawi; Guinea v Ethiopia
Mar 27-28: Ethiopia v Guinea; Malawi v Egypt

Group E
Mar 23: Ghana v Angola; Madagascar v Central African Republic
Mar 27: Angola v Ghana; Central African Republic v Madagascar

Group F
Mar 23-24: Algeria v Niger; Uganda v Tanzania
Mar 27-28: Niger v Algeria; Tanzania v Uganda

Group G
Mar 23-24: Congo v South Sudan; Mali v Gambia
Mar 27-28: South Sudan v Congo; Gambia v Mali

Group H
Mar 23-24: Zambia v Lesotho; Ivory Coast v Comoros
Mar 26-28: Lesotho v Zambia; Comoros v Ivory Coast

Group I
Mar 23-24: Gabon v Sudan; DR Congo v Mauritania
Mar 27-29: Sudan v Gabon; Mauritania v DR Congo

Group J
Mar 24: Tunisia v Libya; Eq. Guinea v Botswana
Mar 28: Libya v Tunisia; Botswana v Eq. Guinea

Group K
Mar 24: South Africa v Liberia
Mar 28: Liberia v South Africa

Group L
Mar 22-24: Benin v Rwanda; Senegal v Mozambique
Mar 27-28: Rwanda v Benin; Mozambique v Senegal

2022-23 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A
Mar 23: Suriname v Mexico
Mar 26: Mexico v Jamaica

Group B
Mar 25: Martinique v Costa Rica
Mar 28: Costa Rica v Panama

Group C
Mar 25: Curacao v Canada
Mar 28: Canada v Honduras

Group D
Mar 24: Grenada v United States
Mar 27: United States v El Salvador

League B

Group A
Mar 23: Barbados v Cuba; Guadeloupe v Antigua & Barbuda
Mar 26: Antigua & Barbuda v Barbados; Cuba v Guadeloupe

Group B
Mar 25: Montserrat v Haiti; Bermuda v Guyana
Mar 28: Guyana v Montserrat; Haiti v Bermuda

Group C
Mar 24: Bahamas v Trinidad & Tobago; Nicaragua v St Vincent & Grenadines
Mar 27: St Vincent & Grenadines v Bahamas; Trinidad & Tobago v Nicaragua

Group D
Mar 24: Belize v Guatemala; French Guiana v Domincan Republic
Mar 27: Domincan Republic v Belize; Guatemala v French Guiana

League C

Group A
Mar 25: Sint-Maarten v Bonaire; Turks & Caicos Islands v US Virgin Islands
Mar 28: US Virgin Islands v Sint-Maarten; Bonaire v Turks & Caicos Islands

Group B
Mar 23: Saint Martin v St Kitts & Nevis
Mar 26: St Kitts & Nevis v Aruba

Group C
Mar 24: Anguilla v Saint Lucia
Mar 27: Saint Lucia v Dominica

Group D
Mar 23: British Virgin Islands v Puerto Rico
Mar 26: Puerto Rico v Cayman Islands

April 2023 *Vol. 63 No. 8*

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DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

PICTURES
Pictures copyright: Getty Images

SPECIAL THANKS THIS ISSUE TO:
Keir Radnedge, Mike Plastow, James Nalton, Carl Worswick, Mauricio Duque Pinzon & Steve Menary

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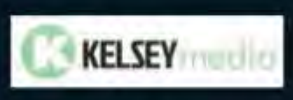

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Joe Cole

Chelsea 4 Barcelona 2

2004-05 Champions League, Stamford Bridge

Speaking to World Soccer at a BT Sport event, former England and Chelsea superstar Joe Cole looks back on the games for club and country that he cherishes more than any other...

"When you play in a Champions League final, that is the pinnacle. You walk past that trophy on your way out onto the pitch and it hits home how far you have gone. This is what you want when you start your career, but the idea that you will get to a Champions League final seems hard to believe. I did that in 2008 with Chelsea, but I can't look back on it as the best game of my career because we lost to Manchester United in Moscow.

For me, the best game I played was the Champions League last-16 game for Chelsea against Barcelona in 2005. The atmosphere that night was different from anything I remember at Stamford Bridge and the game had everything.

We were still proving ourselves at that level, and this was the night when we really believed we could compete with the best because that Barcelona team was something else. They had Ronaldinho, [Samuel] Eto'o, Deco, [Andres] Iniesta, Xavi, [Carles] Puyol... I could go on. But we matched them and we beat them.

We went 3-0 up in the first 20 minutes and the noise was just deafening. I never experienced anything like it. People remember Ronaldinho's toe-punt from that game, when he did a little dance before he stuck it in, and I remember the stadium just stopped. But then at the final whistle, you had Jose Mourinho running around the pitch and it was mayhem.

There was also a bit of afters in the tunnel as the players went off at the end. Ronaldinho wasn't happy, there was a bit of a melee and maybe that was inevitable after such a high-intensity game. Also, there was a little bit of a hangover from the first leg when some tempers were fraying.

It's one of those nights when you come off the pitch and think: "Wow, that was special."

When I look at my England career, the game that stands out is the 2006 World Cup game against Sweden. I scored a nice goal in that game and scoring for England at a World Cup is another dream fulfilled. Yet that game finished 2-2 and it summed up my international career – nearly there, but not quite.

I look at that team and wonder how it didn't win tournaments. We had an incredible set of players, but it is a case of what should have been.

The problem through the 1990s and the early 2000s was a broken system in many ways, and the style of football we were playing wasn't right. We were playing old school football in a modern era, but now things have changed.

I'd love to be playing for England now as the attitudes have changed so much and we've seen that Gareth Southgate has a team playing football that can win tournaments, but it wasn't to be during our time."

Interview by Kevin Palmer

Champions League ...Cole goes up for a header during that Barcelona showdown

World Cup dream... Cole hits his wonder volley against Sweden

> "We went 3-0 up in the first 20 minutes and the noise was just deafening. I never experienced anything like it"

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